Short Stories.

No. 729.
Dec. 20, 1902.

CHRISTMAS DOUBLE NUMBER.

2D.

(A Pathetic Incident from our Splendid Christmas Story, "Sylvia's Home-coming." See inside.)

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THE EDITOR AND STAFF of SHORT STORIES wish you every happiness this Christmas and during the ensuing year. Since last we had an opportunity of sending you these greetings, many improvements have been introduced into SHORT STORIES, with the result that it is one of the greatest successes among fiction papers this century. This is not said in any boastful spirit, but is a true statement of fact. The Editor sincerely hopes that you will all feel as kindly towards the little paper in the future as you have done in the past.

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SYLVIA'S HOME-COMING.

A Tale of Two Christmas Eves.

On the Christmas Eve when their baby came to them there could not have been found in the length and breadth of England a happier couple than Miles Denver and Sylvia his wife; and, of course, they were perfectly positive that never since the beginning of the world had there been so adorable, so wonderful a baby as the wee thing with the crumpled rose-leaf face who lay in Sylvia's arms!

"I never thought anybody could be so exquisitely happy," the young mother whispered, looking up into her husband's face with shining eyes. "I don't feel as if I should ever know the meaning of the word unhappiness again, now that I have got—this," and she pressed her lips to the soft, downy head upon her arm, "this—and you," she added, putting out her free hand to Miles and drawing him down towards her.

"Are you happy, too, Miles?"

Was there just a note of wistfulness in her voice? Just a shadow of anxiety in her sweet eyes? If so, both were dispelled by the young husband's eager reply and impetuous kiss.

"I should rather think I was happy," he answered boyishly. "I never thought a baby could be such a—such a jolly interesting sort of thing; and really, Sylvia, she seems to like me, she's gripping hold of my finger like mad with one of those queer little hands of hers."

And then the two happy young things laughed for sheer gladness of heart, until the nurse bustled in and hustled Miles unceremoniously out of his wife's room, to sit in his own den downstairs and dream most marvellous dreams of the future of that strange new being—his daughter!

His thoughts went back to his first meeting with Sylvia, and their early wedded life. They had been married a year and a half, and he was convinced that no man ever had so sweet, so lovely a wife. What though his family had been not a little vexed with him for selecting as the mistress of his beautiful home a nobody—a girl who had even been working for her living! He had metaphorically snapped his fingers at his family.

It was quite true that Sylvia had worked for her living; indeed, he had first met her when she was governess in the house of some friends of his own, and he had been at once attracted by her lovely face, her gentle, gracious ways.

But it was not true to call her ill-bred, and to declare—as his mother had frequently declared—that Sylvia belonged to nobodies, and that some day she would shame Miles.

"Blood will out," old Mrs. Denver was fond of saying, "bad blood as well as good. And I warn you, Miles, Sylvia's blood is probably bad, therefore beware. I never heard yet of any girl of decent family who had no relations at all."

Irritated though Miles was by his mother's words, he was fain to confess to himself that Sylvia's absence of relations of any kind or degree had struck him as strange, and sitting over the fire to-night, meditating on his new happiness, he thought again of his wife's lonely position, and wished for her sake that she could have had people of her own to be with her now.

Thinking this, he sprang suddenly to his feet.

"Thoughtless brute!" he exclaimed. "I might have suggested her having her own old-nurse instead of the creature my mother has sent to look after her. I wonder Sylvia didn't suggest Nurse Browne herself," and a puzzled frown crossed Miles' face as he remembered the affection with which Sylvia spoke of the old nurse she loved, and whom she insisted upon going to see at more or less regular intervals.

Nurse Browne lived in Surrey, and Sylvia's regular pilgrimages thither had been a source of a certain mild banter on her husband's part; but she had never allowed him to accompany her on her visits, declaring that Nurse would be terrified and overwhelmed by such an honour.

On that Christmas Eve when baby Sylvia came, Miles, sitting by the fire and calling Nurse Browne to mind, leapt, as has been said, to his feet, and repeating to himself that he was a brute, ran upstairs two steps at a time and softly re-entered his wife's room. She greeted him with a lovely smile, and held out her hand whilst the nurse advanced, frowning, from the dressing-room.

"Darling," Miles bent over Sylvia, "it has just dawned upon me what a thoughtless fool I am."

"Has it?" she laughed gently, and stroked his hand. "My dear old boy, what makes you abuse yourself?"

"Why, sweetheart, sitting down in my den by the fire, I began to think of you, and then I thought of Nurse Browne, and——"

"What?" A quiver came into Sylvia's voice, a curious intent look crept over her face.

"Yes, dear," Miles went on unheeding, "I remembered your old nurse, and your love for her, and I called myself names for never having suggested to you to have her here now that——"

"*Have her here?*" Sylvia's voice rose into a thin little scream. "Why, Miles, Miles!" She breathed quickly, and her eyes gleamed feverishly; an uncontrollable agitation seemed to have seized her.

"Wouldn't you like her to come?" the husband continued, a note of surprise in his voice.

"Like her to come? No, no; I mean it—is—impossible." Sylvia controlled herself by a tremendous effort, and the colour came and went upon her face. "Impossible," she repeated faintly.

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My darling, I never meant to upset you so," Miles exclaimed remorsefully, "I only thought——"

"Oh, no!" she said, still speaking with big panting breaths, "I am not upset; at least, I mean—I think I was just surprised—startled. Old Nurse—is—is too old—to—to leave home."

That tremendous effort after self-control was making Sylvia very white and tired, and Miles, terrified by the result of his words, hastily summoned the wrathful nurse to his wife's side, and was turning away when Sylvia's voice said weakly,

"You—you won't send for Mrs.—for old Nurse, Miles, will you? I—she would fidget me; and I—I only want you, dear."

The smile that accompanied the words somewhat neutralised the effect of the strange, frightened look in her big blue eyes, but the whole incident left a curious impression on Miles' mind, an impression he only shook off when, on Sylvia's recovery, she herself laughed over what she called her "silly, hysterical behaviour over old Nurse."

"I *was* a goose," she said, clinging to Miles' arm and looking up bewitchingly into his face; "fancy my making such a fuss over poor old Nanna, as we used to call her! Only, dear, she is so old and—and fussy, and I imagined her worrying about me, and I pictured your being away all day, fetching her, and—and—it gave me the horrors."

After that Miles forget the affair altogether, or only remembered it when Sylvia went off on one of her regular visits to Mrs. Browne, visits which took up a whole day of every month. And as time slipped away the memory of it also slipped entirely from Miles' mind, not to be reawakened until the Autumn that preceded baby Sylvia's third birthday,

* * * * *

On an October morning nearly three years after her baby girl's birth, Sylvia stood looking out of her bedroom window with a troubled look on her face.

"Oh, I wish she wasn't coming! I wish she wasn't coming!" The words were uttered aloud, though there was no one to hear them. "I distrust Clara Metcalfe; she has always spied on me!"

Sylvia's blue eyes clouded. She no longer saw the loveliness of the Autumn world outside; the handsome face of her husband's cousin—the widowed Mrs. Metcalfe—danced before her vision instead, and seemed to mock her with triumphant smiles.

"It's jolly of Clara to want to come and spend a long time with us," Miles' voice exclaimed, as he entered his wife's room. "Clara and I have always been like brother and sister, and I shall like her to be with us for Christmas. She will be a companion, too, for you, darling, now that I have so much to see to at the other end of the estate."

"Yes," Sylvia said mechanically; whilst the thought of Clara's lengthy visit made her heart sink like lead. "I hope she—won't be dull here."

"Dull? Not she! Clara is never dull, she always has plenty on hand."

"Yes, plenty," mused the young wife bitterly, when Miles had vanished again. "She is always busy over other people's affairs. God grant she may not want to find——"

Her musings broke off suddenly, as she caught sight of her little daughter running across the lawn hoop in hand. Sylvia leant far out of the window to watch the child, a smile flickering over her face, a smile that fled quickly as she drew back into the room again.

"My little child!" she whispered passionately, "my little child. How could I bear it—if you ever knew—if Miles ever knew, if—— Ah, I wish Clara were not coming, I have a presentiment of evil. I feel as if a snake were coming into my house that will never leave it till she has wrecked my happiness!"

* * * * *

Clara Metcalfe sat alone in the luxurious spare bedroom at Denver Manor on the first night of her arrival there. Nearly three years had passed since she had last seen Miles and Sylvia, and during those three years her short married life abroad and the early months of her widowhood had kept her out of touch with her English relations.

During their boy and girl days, she and Miles had been—as Miles had told his wife—like brother and sister; at least, the sentiment on Miles' side had been purely brotherly; on Clara's a deeper feeling had existed, and to this fact, perhaps, was due the undoubted antagonism that existed between Miles' cousin and Miles' wife.

Clara's one previous visit, paid to the Denvers in the early days of their marriage, had left no favourable impression of the beautiful woman upon Sylvia's mind. Clara's inquisitiveness about herself, her past, her relations, had irritated the young wife; in her own mind she had designated Miles' cousin "a spy," and Clara's marriage and removal to foreign countries had produced in Sylvia a great sense of relief.

On the other hand, Clara, beneath all her outward professions of affection towards Miles' wife, hated the girl because she had won his love, and bore her a secret grudge for having dared to become his wife.

To-night, at Denver Manor, Mrs. Metcalfe looked at her own dazzling reflection in the glass, and laughed aloud.

"My poor Miles," she said, "you would have done better to make *me* the mistress of your house, instead of that poor, puny, silly thing with the great, frightened eyes. And what is her twopenny love worth, in comparison with *mine?*"

She drew herself up to her superb height and laughed again, a laugh half of scorn, half of triumph, as the light flashed upon the insolent beauty of her face, and shone upon the golden glory of her hair.

"The silly fool has found out my secret!" she went on, a dark look crossing her face. "She has found out that I love Miles. I saw it in her eyes to-night as she watched her husband's face and mine. Perhaps she has realised, too, that my love is to hers what sunlight is to moonlight; perhaps she knows that in a battle between us *I must win.* And—if—she—has found out my secret—I will find out hers," she added slowly, as she unclasped the diamonds from her throat. "I could swear she has a secret; I saw that, too, in her frightened eyes, and I swear I will find it out!"

* * * * *

"Dear Miles, she is so young; sweet, indeed, I grant you, but so young to have so much liberty!"

Clara's soft voice spoke the words as she and Miles paced up and down the rose garden on a November morning.

"Much liberty?" Miles looked surprised. "I don't understand, Clara. In any case, I trust my wife absolutely, but she rarely does anything without me. What do you mean?"

A perceptible hesitation followed the words, and Mrs. Metcalfe traced patterns on the path with the stick she carried.

"Miles," she said suddenly, raising her eyes candidly to his, "I can't bear to make you uneasy, or—or raise doubts in your mind, but—*have you ever been with Sylvia to see that old nurse of whom she speaks?*"

Such significance rang in her accents that Miles stopped dead and stared at her, a sudden recollection sweeping over him of Sylvia's strange conduct when he had suggested that Mrs. Browne might be a comfort to her.

"What do you mean, Clara?" he said sternly. "What are you trying to insinuate?"

"Miles—dear Miles"—she laid a soft hand on his arm—"do not be angry. It is for Sylvia's own good and yours that I speak otherwise. It is a thankless, distasteful task, but are you sure *who* Sylvia goes to see on that monthly visit to Surrey?"

"Of course I am sure!" Irritation born of a tiny

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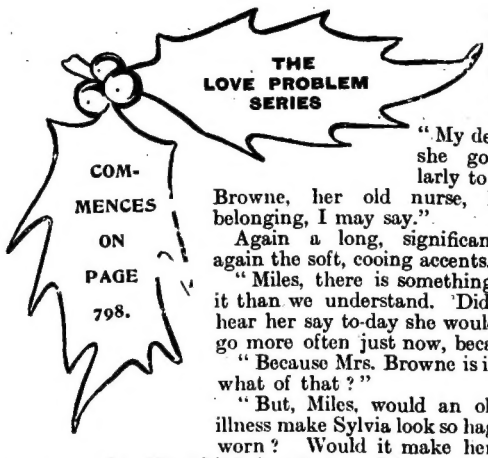

speck of doubt was audible in Miles' voice. "My dear Clara, she goes regularly to see Mrs. Browne, her old nurse, her only belonging, I may say."

Again a long, significant pause, again the soft, cooing accents.

"Miles, there is something more in it than we understand. Did you not hear her say to-day she would have to go more often just now, because——"

"Because Mrs. Browne is ill! Well, what of that?"

"But, Miles, would an old *nurse's* illness make Sylvia look so haggard—so worn? Would it make her start at every sound? Would it bring that terrible fear and anguish into her eyes? Ah, wait—listen to me a moment! I am a woman of the world—she is not. I can see she is in some difficulty, some—some——"

"Then I will go and ask her about it, and help her!" Miles cried impetuously. "You are imagining absurdities, Clara. What difficulty could my wife ——?"

His voice dropped into silence before the strange glance in Clara's eyes.

"Go and ask her by all means," his cousin said slowly, "and by her manner when she answers you, you will be able to judge whether I am exaggerating or no. For the last week and more she has been restless, worried, anxious. The arrival of the post has excited her almost beyond control, and now she says she must go often—often—to see this Mrs. Browne. Miles, believe your old cousin who has been like your sister—*something is wrong!*"

Looking into her exquisite face, seeing the witchery of her eyes, hearing the shake in her lovely voice, what wonder that Miles, being a man, fell under the spell? What wonder that he listened more and more attentively to the words his cousin spoke, whilst they paced up and down the rose-garden, watched, unknown to themselves, by a white, anguished face from the window of Sylvia's room; what wonder that at last, when they turned towards the house, he had yielded to Clara's persuasion and agreed to follow a line of conduct which, in his own heart, he knew to be cowardly and mean?

That evening, after dinner, he drew Sylvia into what he called his "den," a cosy room lined with books, in which the husband and wife had spent many a happy hour together.

"Dear," he said, trying, not very successfully, to keep from his voice some of the hardness and irritation welling up in his heart, "you said to-day you must go and see your old nurse, Mrs. Browne, to-morrow, because she is ill. I have never seen her, I should like to go with you and see what can be done to alleviate the old woman's sufferings. I think I will be your escort to-morrow!"

Sylvia's face grew white, she swayed where she stood, an awful fear looked out of her eyes.

"No—no," she gasped, her hand going up to the collar of her dress, as though to loosen it. "I—you—it is impossible," and she breathed heavy, panting breaths, Miles scanning her intently the while.

"Very well," he answered with assumed carelessness, (Clara had taught her lesson well) "I didn't mean to upset you, dear."

"It—it—isn't that," she panted out. "I—I am tired to-night—it is silly," she tried to laugh. "Why should what you said have upset me? That would be absurd. Only—I don't think I could let you come to see poor Nanna—she—she is so ill—it would frighten her!"

Sylvia's eyes, still wide and terrified, searched her husband's face, but could not read the meaning of the expression there He had learnt his lesson very well indeed; Clara Metcalfe was a past mistress in the art of deceiving!

"Very well, dear," he said carelessly again, "I don't really mind. Go alone and stay with the old woman as long as you like."

And in the great relief that surged over Sylvia's soul, she forgot to note the strange look in her husband's face, the suspicion in his eyes. She even failed to observe that he left the room without giving her his customary kiss!

* * * * *

"Hush—wait! I heard her voice then!"

"I don't like this sort of thing, Clara; it is mean—it is hateful! I shall go straight up to the cottage and declare myself—and——"

"And spoil everything?"

The last voice, soft as it was, held also a note of derision.

"These things are mean and horrible, I agree, but deceit must be met by deceit! Do you intend that your wife should go on living a lie? If you wish to discover the truth, remain silent!"

Silence fell indeed over the two figures who crouched behind a high hedge that bounded a cottage garden. Miles' face was drawn and white with emotion, upon Clara's hovered a little smile of triumph that melted into sorrowful distress whenever Miles' head turned towards her.

From the cottage over the hedge came a subdued sound of voices, a man's low and deep, and a girl's, and, in the clear, sweet accents of the latter, Miles recognised his wife's! The words were inaudible at first, but presently there came the sound of an opening door, and the two watchers crouched further down behind the sheltering hedge.

Yes, it was Sylvia who issued from the cottage—the cottage to which Miles and his cousin had been directed by the porter at the station as Mrs. Browne's. Sylvia came out, her face white as death, her eyes streaming with tears, and close on her heels followed a man, tall, fair, handsome, but with disease, nay, death itself, plainly stamped upon his face.

"You will come again?" the man said, and his voice was hoarse and choked with emotion.

"Can you ask me that, Dick?" Sylvia turned and flung out her hands to him wildly. "Would I not be here always, always—if—if——"

"If you could leave your fine husband, and put up with a cottage," the words were half a laugh, half a sneer.

Miles nearly leapt from his hiding-place, but Clara held him back.

"Ah, don't, Dick, don't, don't!" Sylvia cried. "Miles is so good to me—so good! All the comforts you have are owing to him—all——"

"Are they, though?" muttered Miles with a savage oath, and Clara put her hand hastily over his mouth.

"I would come to you every day, if I could, my darling," Sylvia's voice went on. "I cannot bear to be away from you now, not for a day—not for an hour—when——" Her words ended in a storm of bitter weeping.

"My dearie, you must go now, or you'll be late," came an anxious voice from the doorway, as an old woman appeared on the scene.

"Mrs. Browne," Clara whispered.

"I am going, Nanna, I am really going." Sylvia's voice was still broken by sobs. "I wish I could stay—I wish I could stay, but I must go, or Miles——"

She broke off and suddenly flung her arms round the fair man's neck.

"Good-bye, Dick, my darling," she said, "till next week—only till next week, dear, then your own little Sylvia will come back. Take care of yourself—take care of him, Nanna—till then!" And drawing herself out of the tall man's close embrace, Sylvia passed slowly down the path and out of sight, weeping bitterly as she went.

But that evening, when she reached Denver Manor an hour later than Miles and Clara had reached it, she found a note awaiting her from her husband; she found that he and Clara and her child had left the house a quarter of an hour before her arrival.

Miles' note was very short

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"I have found you out. You wish to stay with your Dick for always; you are free to do so. I never wish to see your face again."

* * * * *

It was Christmas Eve, and Baby Sylvia's third birthday, but as the child stood looking round the library, whither her nurse had brought her, a forlorn feeling stirred within her that something had gone very wrong indeed with her little world. Nothing, indeed, had seemed quite right since mummy went away—even daddy had been quite, quite different, and instead of the glad greeting to which she had always been accustomed, Baby Sylvia found nowadays a silent father, and rooms that, even to her infant soul, conveyed a sense of desolation.

Miles sat by the table now, his head buried in his hands, heedless of the entrance of his little daughter. His form looked bent and aged, there were white threads in his dark hair—marks of the agony he had gone through during the months that had passed since he had, as he expressed it, "found Sylvia out."

In the corner of the room the child could just see a tiny Christmas-tree, waiting to be lighted for her benefit; over the mantelpiece hung a large portrait of her mother—a portrait which Miles refused to have taken down, but at which he looked every day in exceeding bitterness of soul.

The child's step on the floor made him lift his head, his eyes were dim with tears, and the little one crossed quickly to his side and laid her hand on his knee.

"Daddy crying?" she said in her soft little voice. "Whatever's the matter, daddy?"

"It's nothing, darling!" he answered, mastering his emotion. "Daddy was only remembering—other Christmases when—when——" His voice shook, his eyes glanced involuntarily at the lovely pictured face over the mantelpiece.

"When mother was here too?" the child asked wistfully, her glance following his. "Pretty, pretty mummy!" she whispered, kissing her hand to the smiling girl in the portrait. "Where is mother to-night, daddy?"

The earnest words, the pressure of the little hands on his knee, the wistful, upturned face, struck Miles like a blow. He sprang to his feet and began to pace the room restlessly.

"I don't know!" he muttered. "I don't know where she is. If I knew—if I could find her, I would forgive all—all—I——"

He lifted his eyes again to the lovely face on the wall, which seemed to look down at him reproachfully, and again he repeated brokenly:

"I would forgive all, Sylvia! I would forgive all, if——" Then he sank down by the table again, and once more buried his face in his hands.

No word, no sign had come from the wife he had lost since that fatal day when he and Clara had watched her from behind the high hedge.

Urged thereto by his cousin, under whose spell he still lay, he had written that letter to his wife on his hurried return from the Surrey expedition; urged also by her he had left the house before Sylvia's return, going to London to his mother's house with Clara and the child.

And then had come a sick revolt against himself, a sick loathing of his beautiful cousin, and a wild, intolerable longing for his wife—his Sylvia, his darling.

A journey to the Surrey cottage had revealed an empty, deserted house, and all his inquiries in the neighbourhood elicited only the fact that Mrs. Brown, the gentleman who lived with her, and a pretty young lady had all gone away together, whither no one could tell.

Then Miles returned to his desolate home, insisted upon baby Sylvia's return there also, and utterly refused to allow his mother, his sisters, or his cousin, Mrs. Metcalfe, to come near him.

"You all hated her—my darling!" he wrote; "leave me alone in my grief. My child and I will comfort one another."

And so the days had dragged wearily by until Christmas Eve and Baby Sylvia's birthday came together, and Miles strove to arouse himself from the deadly lethargy of sorrow to make his little daughter happy.

But the child's wistful words had unmanned him.

"Where is mother to-night?" she had said in her clear, baby voice; and Miles could only echo the words drearily: "Where, indeed?"

There was a long silence in the library after that outburst of grief from Miles, and baby Sylvia stood beside him watching him with loving, troubled glances.

"Won't mummy come home for Baby Sylvia's birthday?" she whispered suddenly; and Miles lifted his tear-stained face and caught the child to his breast.

"I wish to God she would!" he cried. "I wish to God she would! Ah! Sylvia—Sylvia—Sylvia! come back to me!"

The child, frightened by his vehemence, clung to him closely, and the door opened and shut softly unheard by them both.

"I wish we knew where mummy was," the little girl said. "Baby Sylvia dreadful frightened—wants her mummy!"

There was a little rustle of skirts, a broken sob, a low exclamation, and all in a moment someone was kneeling by Miles' side, gripping at his arm with clinging, feverish touch, and a voice said breathlessly:

"Ah! Miles, Miles, say it again; say 'Sylvia, come back!' See! She has come—I have come back to you, Miles—to ask you——"

Her sentence had no ending. Miles lifted his dazed and miserable face from Baby Sylvia's golden curls, and looked down at the kneeling form at his feet. And when he saw her white, worn face, her dim eyes, the trembling of her sweet mouth, everything was forgotten but his love for her, and he stooped and gathered her into his arms, murmuring:

"Thank God! Oh! thank God—my wife!"

Presently, when they were calmer, she said brokenly:

"Miles, I crept in an hour ago by the back door, and I have been long, so long in the hall listening to your dear voice and my baby's. And I heard you say 'I would forgive all.' Ah! my dear, you have much to forgive; but not what you thought. I have never been untrue to you, my husband, in word or thought." Her voice was very grave, her eyes met her husband's frankly.

They were sitting side by side upon the sofa, baby Sylvia gathered close into her mother's arm, and Miles looked into his wife's face narrowly.

"Then, who," he said—"what—who was Dick? What did it all mean?"

She answered: "Miles, I *have* deceived you—deceived you always, but not as you feared. Dick was my brother, my only brother. He—he is dead!" She glanced at her black garments. "He had committed a crime for which he should have suffered punishment, but—— Oh! Miles, we hid him—old Nanna and I—and nobody ever knew where he was. I did not dare to tell you that my brother was a forger. I did not dare let you know the truth; it was cowardly, it was wrong of me, but—I was afraid! And then he became ill, desperately ill, ill unto death. It was at that time you found out, Miles! His illness was breaking my heart, but having deceived you so long I was afraid to tell you the truth then. When I found your awful letter—oh! Miles it nearly killed me; but Dick was dying; I was afraid lest you should discover his identity and insist on his punishment. I think I was mad! Nanna and I took him away and nursed him till he died; and pride and terror combined prevented me from exonerating myself in your eyes. I hated to think you had distrusted me; I knew it was Clara's doing, and I was heartbroken! To-night, my baby's birthday, I *had* to come home—home to you both, and now—and now——"

"And now we will never distrust each other again, sweetheart. We will never let a living soul come between us any more. There is only one woman I love in this whole wide world, and her name is—Sylvia!" **L. G. Moberley.**

An Extravagant Man.

Father: "Yes, I admit your lover has a good income, but he has very expensive tastes, very." Daughter: "You amaze me; what does he ever want that is so expensive?" Father: "Well, you for one thing."

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A Fairy's Revenge.

A Christmas Pantomime Story.

"Look here, you two girls!" said the stage manager warningly; "if there's any more of this sort of thing at show-time, you'll have to take a week's notice, both of you!"

The "sort of thing" consisted of a noisy passage of tongue—almost of arms—between the two ladies referred to; both of whom were in what is theatrically known as the "front row."

The feud had gone on all through the rehearsals of the pantomime at the "Coliseum," having originated in the determined endeavour of Hannah Dent to lure from his allegiance the affianced lover of Cissy Lane.

The gentleman in question was a prosperous young "coster" on the south side, known to the general public in the neighbourhood of the Old Kent Road as "King Jack" and the "Coster King."

The rivalry between the two coryphees for the valuable affections of his coster majesty, had culminated on Boxing Night, when, owing to the absence of the principal solo dancer, through sudden illness, Cissy Lane was hurriedly requisitioned to fill the gap.

Professional jealousy is not an altogether unknown quantity in theatrical life, but in this particular instance there was only one voice raised in angry disapproval. With the majority of the ballet girls, Cissy Lane, by reason of her happy good-humour, and kindliness of disposition, was a great favourite, and no one, except Hannah Dent, envied her her good fortune.

"I've been longer at it than she has," spitefully whispered the latter to her neighbour, as the Fairies of the Glen stood in a half circle and watched the evolutions of Cissy as Fairy Queen. "There'll be no bearing her now! I can't make out what Marlow" (the stage manager) "sees in her!"

"Oh! Cissy's a daisy!" whispered back the neighbour, glad of an opportunity of setting down the maliciously-minded Hannah. "An' as for her dancin', there ain't no one in this show as is fit to chalk 'er shoes for 'er!"

"*Rats!*" was Hannah Dent's elegant rejoinder, and at the same moment Cissy finished her *pas seul* at the *O.P.* corner with a succession of rapid pirouettes, that elicited a perfect storm of applause from the crowded house.

It was then that, standing in the proscenium opening, close behind Hannah Dent, Cissy—never one to start a quarrel or altercation—was goaded to reply to an aggravating remark made by her rival over her shoulder.

One word led to another, resulting, as has been said, in a warning reprimand from the stage manager.

Still, things might probably have simmered down to at least something in the shape of a truce, but for a definite statement of Hannah's that she had in her pocket a letter from Jack Martindale to herself.

"Jack write to you!" said Cissy hoarsely, her eyes ablaze with angry disbelief. "I don't believe you! You're a wicked woman!"

"Don't spoil your beauty, my dear, by gettin' in a tear! I've got it, an' I'll show it you in a minute, when we're off!"

"You can't! You can't! My Jack wouldn't look at you!"

"Oh, indeed, wouldn't he? Well, p'r'aps you'll alter your tune when I tells you as he's arsked me to drive with him to Greenwich on Sunday! All right, Mr. Marlow" (to the stage manager), "I'll shut up! I've said all as I wants to!"

"That's lucky!" Marlow replied. "It will be as well to mind what I've told you."

"Mind!" Cissy hissed in the other's ear, as the manager passed out of hearing. "You show me that letter—if you can!"

Then everybody was on the move for a concluding wild dance as the scene closed in.

The dressing-room accommodation of the "Coliseum" was not by any means worthy of praise, being alike limited, dirty, and inconvenient.

Cissy Lane, as merely a temporary substitute for the *première danseuse*, was, of course, still reckoned only as one of the rank-and-file, and so far as dressing arrangements went, was treated accordingly.

As Hannah Dent pressed into the low, narrow room, in the train of the muslin-skirted crowd, she saw Cissy standing by the rickety bench, which did duty for a dressing-table, her face set and white, and in her eyes a look of stony expectation.

By this time all the other girls were full of the matter, sympathy for Cissy being, however, almost the universal feeling amongst them.

"Show me that letter!" said Cissy at length, mechanically.

"What! in front of 'em all?"

"Show me the letter!" the girl repeated, this time in a slightly raised tone.

"Oh, I'm agreeable! if you are, my dear! Only I thought p'r'aps as you wouldn't care to give yourself away-like!"

"The letter!"

"'You needn't think as I'm goin' to let you read it! You know's Jack's writin'. Well, an' how he signs his name. There you are, my dear!" (folding a letter, which she drew from the bosom of her dress, so as to show the signature only, and holding it close to Cissy's face), "is that anythin' like it, eh?"

One glance was enough! She had had only too many of Jack's labouredly-penned notes left for her at the stage-door, not to be able to recognise the writing.

For a moment the assembled girls looked for their badgered, insulted comrade to turn and rend her persecutor. And, to a girl, they would have applauded any such action on Cissy's part, and stood by her. But to their astonishment she said nothing. She just put both her hands up to her face, and seemed to shrink into herself.

Long after Hannah Dent's departure from the theatre, she stood still in her stage finery alone, and unmindful of everything around her. By-and-bye the wardrobe woman, an especially good friend of hers, came into the room.

"Good gracious! My dear, not gone yet? What on earth is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Smith," she replied wearily.

"Nonsense, child, don't tell me! Why you're crying! And if you stands 'ere much longer in them flimsy fal-lals, you'll ketch your death-o' cold."

"Never mind me, Mrs. Smith," she said. "I'm going to dress now."

"I should think so indeed, an' a smart young man a' wearin' 'is boots out, to say nothin' of 'is 'cart, walkin' up an' down outside, like a caged zoological."

"Tell him to go away, Mrs. Smith! Please tell him to go away!"

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"Now then, Cissy!" said the old woman, suddenly putting out her hands and gripping fast hold of both the poor Fairy Queen's. "You'll have to tell me what's up! What's Jack Martindale bin doin' of as you wants to chivey 'im?"

"It's not him so much," sobbed Cissy, "it's Hannah Dent."

"Well, what's that hussy's game?"

"She's taken Jack from me!" said Cissy, completely breaking down, and laying her head on Mrs. Smith's sympathetic shoulder. "He's written her a letter, asking her to go to Greenwich with him on Sunday, and—and I've seen it!"

"Seen the letter?"

"Well, I saw his name at the bottom of it."

"That's nothin'! It's a trick of that artful piece of goods, Hannah Dent. I knows 'er! Come, dress yourself quick! child, an' go an' arsk Jack straight, if 'e's off with you an' on with Hannah? It's the only way to get at the truth of it. For my part, I don't believe Jack Martindale would do such a dirty trick, while I *do* believe as Hannah Dent wouldn't stop short o' murder even if she 'ad 'er knife into anybody."

But when, a quarter of an hour later, Cissy, piloted by Mrs. Smith, passed through the stage-door into the street, there was no one there; no signs of Jack.

"Well, my dear, I don't want to hurt your feelin's, but you've only got yourself to blame. But let's arsk Tims! 'e'll know. 'Ere, Tims (to the door-keeper) seen anybody a waitin' outside?"

"Yes. Jack Martindale. He arsked me, 'alf-a-dozen times, when Cissy Lane were comin'. He were tearin' mad-like when I told 'im as I didn't know. Ten minutes ago Hannah Dent come along an' they went away together, Old Kent Road way, though I must say as 'e didn't seem as if 'e wanted to go much. But she whispered 'im, an' laughed a bit, and e' went off with 'er."

"Come along, Cissy!" said Mrs. Smith grimly. "Good night, Tims! Now look a-here," she said, when they were out in the main road. "You leave this to me! Go you home, an' go to bed. If I don't spring Hannah Dent's trap, and catch 'er in it finely, so as she can't easy set it again, my name ain't Martha Smith."

* * * * *

When Mrs. Martha Smith once put her hand to anything, she, as a rule, was successful.

For more than an hour that night, bitterly cold as it was, and inclined to snow, she traversed the length of the Old Kent Road in quest of Coster Jack.

Just as she was about to give up her search, she saw him coming along the almost deserted pavement, his hands in his pockets, his head bent, and about him altogether a curious air of depression. In common with most folks in the district she knew him, and did not hesitate now to accost him.

"Good evenin', Mr. Jack Martindale!" she said, with dangerous pleasantness.

Taking his pipe out of his mouth he returned "Good evenin'," and made to pass on his way.

"Can I have a word with you?" said the old wardrobe woman, barring his passage.

"A word with me? Course you can, if you wants one. Wot is it?"

"Oh, I shan't keep you long! I wants to ask you a matter of two simple questions."

"Arsk away! Don't be long about it, for I wants to get to bed. 'As to be up at four in the mornin', you know."

"All right. Well, did you ever write a letter to Hannah Dent?"

"Well, if you wants to know pertickler, though I can't see as it's any business of yours, Mrs. Smith—I did write Hannah Dent a letter."

"Oh, you did! Well, p'r'aps you'll tell me, as is Cissy Lane's good friend, poor girl, if you've done with her, an' 'a' taken up with that shame-faced hussy, Hannah Dent?"

"Have I done wot?" exclaimed the other. "Why, you're mad, Mother Smith; it's Cissy as 'as chucked me up!"

"Not she! She's too fond of yer! Will you tell me what you said in your letter to Hannah Dent?"

"I don't mind tellin' you. I just said as I'd 'eard from one of the girls at the theatre as she were givin' Cissy too much chin-music, an' I tells 'er as she'll 'ave to stop it. That's all!"

"On yer gospel?"

"Yes."

"Jack Martindale, I believes yer! Shake hands! Now listen to me! I'll see Cissy to-morrer mornin' first thing, an' tell 'er the truth. You come round as usual after the show in the evenin', an' if you don't then, between you, make it up, so as it can't come undone agin', why you're no man, an' Cissy's a little fool!"

The next morning Mrs. Smith carried out faithfully her part of the programme, leaving Cissy in a state of eager longing for the moment of reconciliation.

But, like many another anticipated life-pleasure, that moment was delayed beyond almost the bearing-limit of two really loving hearts.

* * * * *

In the scene of the Fairy Glen, torches were used to give a weird effect in the semi-darkness. At one point in the action each ballet-girl, previously provided with an electric torch, which up to then she had held behind her, suddenly produced it, and held it arm-high, above her head.

By some mischance, on the second night of the pantomime, the wire attached to the portable battery, concealed in the wings on Hannah Dent's shoulders, became fused, and before it was realised what had occurred, the unfortunate girl's costume of light material was in a blaze.

Shriek upon shriek went up, as the victim of the accident ran hither and thither, to her own danger, and the danger of those about her similarly attired.

Before the curtain could be lowered, a scene was witnessed by both audience and stage hands which neither will ever forget.

At the left wing, half way up the stage, stood a throne, with about it voluminous hangings.

Towards this Cissy Lane was seen rushing. Tearing down one of the curtains, she first deftly dodged the now maddened Hannah, and then, throwing the curtain over the other's head, clasped her arms round it and her, and rolled the object of her heroic efforts frantically to-and-fro upon the stage.

When both rescuer and rescued were medically examined at the adjacent hospital, it was found that Cissy Lane's arms and neck were fearfully burnt, while Hannah's state gave very little hope that she would ever recover.

That this latter prediction was falsified was due more to splendid nursing than to anything else, and to the cheering encouragement of her bed-neighbour, Cissy Lane.

Cissy left the hospital first, but she never missed a visiting day, when she would take her quondam enemy such little luxuries as the rules allowed.

But Hannah came to look, not for the fruit or other delicacies, but for Cissy's smile and word of tender sympathy.

She did not as yet say much, but lay apparently quite content to listen and to gaze.

One afternoon Jack Martindale, at Hannah's special request, accompanied Cissy.

Association with Cissy had rubbed down all that was rough and coarse in his nature, and any feeling of dislike and contempt, which he might otherwise have had for the author of the cruel plot to spoil his and Cissy's lives, was lost in her sufferings, and for her prospects of a maimed and useless future.

She did not say much even now.

Taking the hands of Jack Martindale and her sweetheart between her own, she looked up at them, her eyes swimming with tears, and just said, "I *do* arsk your pardon, both of yer! Jack, you've got as true an angel as ever's up in Heaven!"

"I knows it!" said Jack.

"But angels have wings, Jack," said Cissy, feeling that she must say something.

"Has they?" he answered her. "Well, I'm mortal glad you hasn't, as I'm sure now as you'll never be able to fly away from me."

Ralph Enderby.

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Mistletoe.

A Christmas Story.

It was the morning of Christmas Eve. The ground rang hard underfoot and the newly risen sun, shining red and wintry through the black, bare trees, made the frost-whitened lawns and hedges sparkle as though they were powdered with jewels.

Striding across the grass went Frank Sinclair, twenty-one, manly and handsome. He walked quickly, for his way led to the orchard where he was to meet his sweetheart; yet his face bore a sad, troubled expression. After to-day he would not see her for a long time, perhaps not for four years. He had to spend Christmas Day in London and then he was off to the east coast of Africa, there to help the construction of some railways. Of the future he had no doubt. He would soon achieve a good position and return to marry Blanche Harrap; but it was hard to leave her, his little Blanche, so soon after they had plighted their troth.

Fast as he walked Blanche had reached the trysting-place before him. As he entered the orchard he saw her standing beneath an old apple tree whose bare branches bore here and there large boughs of dark green mistletoe. His eyes shone with delight as he gazed on the pretty picture she made. Her shapely head was crowned with a large black hat, on the under side of which was a bunch of violets nestled against her beautiful brown hair. A close-fitting jacket of warm brown fur covered her body, and her right hand hid itself deep out of sight in a large muff, of the same rich skin, to which she had pinned another bunch of violets. Her left hand held gracefully from the ground a trailing skirt of dark grey cloth.

"Why, Blanche," he cried, as he kissed her, "how long have you been waiting, lassie?"

"Not many minutes, Frank," she answered, gazing wistfully up at him. "I came in plenty of time, for I could not bear to lose a single minute of our last hour together."

For answer he kissed her again passionately.

"I'll not be away from you long, Blanche," he said. "Very soon I'll come back again. After that we will never part any more."

"You won't forget me? Promise, Frankie," she intreated.

"Forget you! Of course I won't forget you, little Blanche."

"And you'll write to me often—very often?"

"Yes, if you don't get my letters you will know that I have been sent where there is no post, or——" The grey eyes gazing into his were rapidly filling with tears, so, kissing them, Frank, who was himself very near tears, sought to interest her in other subjects.

"Come, lassie," he said, "there are very many places I want you to take me to. I must say 'Good-bye' to all our favourite walks and views; but first of all I am going to climb into this dear old tree and bring you down a great big bunch of mistletoe. Then we will go to Davis, and ask him to save a piece from this very tree for us every year. Until I come back he must send it to you. When you get my Christmas letters will you open them under the mistletoe?"

Frank quickly and lightly swung himself up amongst the branches, and was soon down beside Blanche again, bearing in his hands the largest bough that had grown on the tree. He held it over her head. His other arm incircled her waist and drew her to him. Their lips met.

"Blanche, little Blanche," he cried, "never mistrust me. I will always, always love you."

* * * * *

Mamie Russell dashed into her aunt's boudoir.

"Auntie Blanche, Auntie Blanche," she cried excitedly. "Harry has come home. He will be here to-day. See, here is a letter from Southampton and a telegram from London. He has discovered a gold mine—he and three others, and he has come home to me again. Just fancy, he will be here for to-morrow—Christmas Day, and I did not expect to see him again for another two Christmasses. Oh, Auntie, dear, isn't it just splendid?"

Putting her arm round her aunt's neck she gave her a great kiss and then ran to the door.

"I must tell them to get his room ready, and then I will take the trap and drive down to the station to meet him. The train will be here in half an hour." She opened the door, and then turned back, holding a letter in her hand. "Oh, Auntie, I am sorry," she said, "here is a letter for you. I should have given it to you at first."

For a long time after her niece had left, Blanche Harrap sat gazing out of the windows over the frost-covered hedgerows and meadows. There was a great longing in her beautiful grey eyes. Fifteen years ago that day she had said "Good-bye" to her sweetheart, and she still waited his return. For the first two years he had written to her regularly. Then came a letter which said he expected to be home in a few months for the work was almost done. After that there came no more. She wrote three letters to his last address; but they were returned marked "gone away." A letter to the man he had worked under elicited the information that young Sinclair had set out on a hunting expedition into the interior and had not been seen since. After that she sent no more; but waited for him to come, remembering the words he had said when he kissed her beneath the mistletoe on that last day so long ago.

There still came to her every Christmas a bunch of mistletoe from that same apple tree. She would have stopped its annual appearance, but that, deep in her heart, there was a feeling that as long as the token hung overhead at Christmas time there was still a chance that a letter from Frank, or perhaps Frank himself, might come to greet her with wishes for a happy and joyous year.

With a sigh she opened the letter in her hand. As she read she gave a little cry of distress and tears came into her eyes.

"Dear Miss," it ran, in the trembling writing of old Davis, "I am sorry that this year we cannot carry out Mr. Frank's wishes. There was only one branch of mistletoe on the old tree, and I regret to say that some stranger came into the orchard last night and took it."

"Oh, they might have left me that," cried poor Blanche, "it was all I had left. I wanted it so! I wanted it so!"

Just then she heard the wheels of the dogcart on the gravel below, and dried her eyes hastily. In a few minutes her niece

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came in, her eyes aglow with pleasure, followed by Harry, bronzed and well and evidently also very happy.

"Welcome home, Harry," she said, rising to meet him. "I hear that you have good news. I am very glad, both for your own sake and for Mamie's. I hope you are going to stay in England for a long time. Mamie has been very lonely without you."

Harry gently gripped the hand extended to him, and said never a word. He knew nothing of Miss Harrap's story; but to his mind she was a woman who deserved far greater happiness than had fallen to her share. There was a touch of sadness in her welcome that set him thinking that perhaps she understood more of Mamie's loneliness than she had ever told.

"Oh, Auntie, it's such a wonderful story," broke in Mamie. "Harry rescued a man from a tribe of savages and through that found the gold. You tell, Harry."

"There is nothing much to tell," said Harry. He disliked talking—talking to one's sweetheart is a different matter of course. "You see, Miss Harrap, after I had finished with those steamers on Lake Nyassa—Mamie probably told you about them—I took a little holiday. I and two other men struck west into British Central Africa. We had not been on the march for more than a fortnight before we came across a man—an Englishman—who had been carried off by one of the native tribes and held captive for twelve or thirteen years. We rescued him, of course, and he showed us one of the richest gold mines I have ever heard of or seen. It was worked some hundreds of years ago I should think, but has long been in disuse. The rescued man and I have come to England together to manage the business side of the operations."

Blanche Harrap's breath came fast as she listened to the tale.

"What is this man's name? You have not told us," she said in a low tone.

"Oh, have I not," answered Harry. "It is——"

"Mr. Frank Sinclair!" announced a servant, flinging wide the door.

"Frank, Frank!" cried Blanche, with a little laughing sob, as she gazed at the tall man who entered, his arms filled by a big bunch of mistletoe.

Before she could realise her happiness the mistletoe was over her head, a strong arm was round her waist, and his lips were pressed to hers.

"Blanche, my little Blanche, I have never loved any one save you," was all his greeting.

Harry looked on in amazement.

"Sinclair," he said at last. "How did you come here? Why did you not tell me that you knew Miss Harrap?"

Frank answered him; but his eyes were turned towards Blanche.

"I thought it must be my Miss Harrap," he said slowly, "but I dared not ask until I reached England. Then I went straight to old Davis; but reached there too late last night to see him. I went into the orchard and saw this, which I took to bring to you. It is from the old tree. In the morning I found Davis and learnt that he had that moment sent off a letter telling you that the mistletoe had been stolen. I asked your address, and—Blanche, Blanche, you are more beautiful than ever you were!"

"I think there will be two weddings instead of one," said Mamie, smiling up into Harry's eyes.

Ernest Herbert.

Cora: "You have a fine sense of the ridiculous." Dick (rather flattered): "Why do you think so?" Cora: "I noticed you smiling at yourself in the mirror."

Little Tommy (son of host): "Oh, Mr. Newrich, I do so wish I was you." Mr. Newrich: "Do you, my little man? And why do you wish you were me?" Little Tommy: "'Cos you don't get your fingers rapped when you put your knife in your mouth."

Is Your Birthday This Week?

We have recently secured the services of a well-known astrologer, and below will be found his information for this week's birthdays.

December 16.—If the birthday falls here, then care will be needed over writing, news and friends during the next twelve months.

Girls will have attentions, but should see that these are not from married men.

The day is not good; many promising speculations may be met with, but these should be passed by.

A child born here will be fond of change, and if born near 1 p.m. will travel much and go abroad.

December 17.— Attend to business and domestic matters. The health will need some extra care. Bad for farmers and builders.

Young girls should be cautious in their love affairs; some friction; letters cause anxiety.

The day is good for dealing with doctors, dentists, and military men; evil for doing business with aged people, or for marriage.

A child born here will be active, but too fond of pleasure. The mind will be quick, though there will be too much caution at times.

December 18.— An unfavourable birthday; avoid law, speculation, and attend to business. Those in employ are in danger of losing it.

Girls will meet with disappointments in love matters.

The day is evil for most matters; go quietly and let others make the first move.

A child born here will be quick of wit, but cunning, and will meet with but little success in life.

December 19.— A fortunate day, and the events through the year will go well. Promotion is shown for those in employ.

If engaged, girls will marry, and love matters are very interesting.

The day is good for buying or selling: for engaging servants, marriage, visiting, letter writing, asking favours or changing residence.

A child born here will be quick, ingenious, and cheerful. Will be fortunate and do well in business for itself.

December 20.— The year will require some care; danger of sickness in domestic circle.

Girls born near 9 p.m. should be cautious and prudent with opposite sex.

The day is not promising for letter writing, love affairs, dealing with landlords, builders, farmers, and literary men.

A child born here will be moody, and difficult to understand.

December 21.— A mixed year; much change and travel. Insure against fire and accident. Better for elderly people.

Girls born near noon, or between 4 and 5 p.m. will quarrel with lovers and need care against deceit.

A child born this day will be rash and headstrong; travel much and often be in danger of mishap.

December 22.— Much perplexity and worry for the year; sickness in the household; avoid speculation and law

Young girls meet with many crosses in their love affairs, and will have cause for grief.

The day is evil for speculation, marriage, letter writing, or doing business with young people.

A child born to-day will be idle, fond of company, and very crafty. It will not be fortunate; unhappy in marriage if a girl.

Asturel.

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HE, SHE AND ANOTHER.

A Tale of Christmas Theatricals.

"If there is one thing I despise more than another," says Kitty, with an air of lofty indignation, "it is a man who doesn't know his own mind for half an hour together."

"Meaning ——?"

"Meaning no one. I simply stated a fact."

"Now, that's unkind. I can stand a good deal, but to be called 'a fact' is too much, Kitty. You told me the other day that you hated 'facts and figures,' and such rubbish; and you don't hate me, do you, dear?"

"There's no dealing with you, Gilbert, when you go on like this. I can't argue. I don't profess to be smart with my tongue. I leave that to clever people like you—and Paula Chester. But"—and Kitty rises to give emphasis to the remark—"I don't say one thing at breakfast, and another at lunch, and a third at dinner."

"Good gracious, Kitty, do you give vent to the same remark all the time? I confess I'd not observed it."

"As I have already said"—Kitty advances gracefully towards the door—"I can't argue, so I'll leave you in possession of the field. I hope"—a little viciously—"you'll enjoy your walk with Paula, but I'm afraid it's going to rain. May I trouble you to move from the door? I wish to go out."

"Not while you are cross, Kitty. I sha'n't allow you to pass till——"

He stoops, turning the winsome face up to his own.

"Give me a kiss, little woman, and be friends."

Kitty draws back, her face aflame with indignation.

"No, that I will not put up with. You think that you can treat me like a child. You flirt with another woman, slighting me the while, and then when the mood takes you, imagine you can come back again to me."

Gilbert Danvers looks grave. "Hush," he says, coldly, "I cannot let you say such things to me, Kitty."

"And I," she retorts, "will not allow you to stop me telling you what everyone is saying, what everyone declares to be the truth, that you seize every opportunity to be with Paula Chester—watch her, and wait for her every minute in the day."

"You believe this, Kitty?"

"How can I help believing it? I have shut my ears to the gossip in the house about you, I have taken myself to task for noticing how many times your eyes stray from my face to hers. I have combated every accusation brought against you. But I can bear no more. This afternoon"—she catches her breath in an effort to speak calmly—"this afternoon you told me that you had important letters to write, and so could not go with me, as you promised, for a drive. And then, when I come down, I hear that you have changed your mind, and are going out with Paula Chester."

"Who told you so?"

"*She*," flashes Kitty, "*she* told me, with an air of incomparable insolence, as though to say, 'You see he only talks to you from duty; his desire is to be with me.'

"But, perhaps"—Kitty's voice sounds softer, and her eyes have lost something of their scorn—"perhaps she was mistaken?"

Gilbert Danvers glances at the dainty figure, and a hot flush dyes his face.

"Did you ask her to go for a walk, Gilbert?" She has come a little closer, her silken skirts brush against him, and he breathes the subtle perfume which clings round her—a step nearer and he could have clasped her in his arms. The thought of her warm, red lips, that a few minutes ago had clung to his—her round, white arms, that she had clasped about his neck, soften him. He cannot let her go in anger.

"Kitty, my darling, won't you trust me?"

He thinks she will not demand an explanation about Paula after all, that she will let the matter drop. But Kitty is not so easily dissuaded.

"Did you arrange to go out with her, Gilbert? Tell me," she adds beseechingly. "I won't mind very much, only tell me."

He squares his shoulders and looks over her head.

"I did."

"You forgot what you had said to me, perhaps?"

"No."

"You *preferred* to go out with Paula Chester?"

He shifts his position uneasily. Kitty is his darling, and his sweetheart, as good, as beautiful as man could desire, but he could find it in his heart to wish that a little mercy should temper her judgment.

"I don't think, dear," he says at last, "that I need answer that question. I did arrange to go out with Miss Chester, but beyond that I can tell you nothing. I have no explanation to offer."

He knows it is not fair to her, he knows that to hesitate is only putting off the day of reckoning, but he knows also that Kitty loves him with all the strength of her tender heart.

"Gilbert!" she cries pitifully, and puts out her little hands.

But knowing the battle is won, he disregards the invitation.

"Do you trust me, Kitty?"

The answer is inaudible, and he judges it best to put it in a different form.

"You know I love you, dear?"

"Yes," with a little gulp, which causes Gilbert to call himself bad names, "she thought so."

"Then, dearest, how could I wish to slight or hurt you? Only trust me, darling, and all will be well."

She sighs and gropes feebly for the handle of the door.

"Don't you think you owe me reparation, Kitty?"

He is amazingly audacious, and she knows it; but he is very much to her, this tall, good-looking lover, with the grave, dark eyes, and so she turns her face towards him, thankful that the twilight hides her blushes.

But he is merciless. "No," he says; "to take is not to give. You must kiss me of your own free will."

She hesitates, and then standing on tiptoe—for Gilbert is a giant among men, and Kitty herself of the adorable order of women, neither short nor tall—draws his head level to her own.

Something of passion stirs within her, her love seems altered, grown, intensified. She lays her lips on his, and with her whole soul in her eyes kisses him, not once but twenty times.

"My love, my darling." He strains her closer in the darkness; but, shamefaced, she breaks from him, and hurries with beating heart and burning cheeks up to her room.

Gilbert breathes a little quickly at the thought of her last kiss, then lighting a cigarette, strolls to the window.

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"It's an awful nuisance," he thinks, staring moodily at the grey autumnal afternoon.

"Ten to one Kitty will see me, and then——" with an expressive shrug, he turns away and makes for the fir plantation, where he knows Paula Chester has been waiting this last half hour.

"I thought you were never coming, Gilbert."

It is a low, rich voice that greets him, but at the sound the young man stiffens, and his face wears a strangely hard, almost forbidding look as he greets her.

Tall, dark, and passionate, Paula Chester has been likened to a pomegranate blossom, with her scarlet mouth and glowing cheeks. But Gilbert, beauty lover as he is, seems curiously unmoved by the lovely face upturned to his.

The interview is short and apparently unsatisfactory to both parties, for Gilbert returns to the house with bent brows and tight set lips, and Paula, gazing after the tall, straight figure, clenches her little hands and breaks into a sob.

"My darling, my darling," she cries, "you were mine once, and you shall be mine again. In spite of yourself I'll make you love me!"

The Time is Christmas.

THERE is an air of subdued excitement about the house. Mysterious confabs are held in remote corners, everybody bears a more or less distracted or abstracted look, and refers perpetually, to a small paper-covered book.

"One would think we were conspirators," laughs Kitty, as she runs up against Freddy Hunter. "Who could imagine that all this preparation and mystery was in connection with private theatricals?"

"That's where the fun comes, Miss Trent. We are all about to spring surprises on each other. For instance, you would not think that I should make a realistic bandit?" with an air of pride.

Freddy is a fair and somewhat meek-and-mild young man, with about as unbrigand-like a countenance as can be imagined.

"No," falters Kitty.

"So I expected," chirps Freddy; "wait till you see me in a black wig and corked eyebrows and you won't know me."

"But," she protests, the spirit of mirth lurking in each dimpled cheek, "surely there's no brigand in 'The Magistrate'?"

"Oh, I wasn't speaking of the play!" somewhat contemptuously, "I meant the tableaux. You know, Miss Trent, tableaux are always such a success. I thought a few serious scenes would come in well after Pinero's farce."

The idea of Freddy as a bandit is anything but serious, but Kitty chokes back her laughter, and agrees to urge the point with Gilbert, who, as stage manager, is, as his sweetheart somewhat pertly puts it, "bossing the show."

Paula hears the atrocious piece of slang and gazes with unspeakable contempt in her direction.

"It's such a mistake," she murmurs to the curate, her abject slave, "for women to be slangy. Mr. Danvers has such an objection to it."

Kitty moves away, a little hurt that Gilbert has not championed her cause, instead of leaving it to Freddy Hunter, who, with a devotion worthy of a better wit, flings himself into the breach, and makes matters worse by stating that, "Danvers is not everybody, is he, Miss Trent?"

She wishes the theatricals were at the bottom of the sea, wishes she'd never accepted Lady Rawton's invitation, wishes still more ardently that Paula Chester were anywhere but here.

"Paula's an old school-fellow of mine, dear," little Lady Rawton had explained; "she used to know Gilbert years ago, I fancy—when he was poor, you know, and studying in Rome. I hardly know how I came to invite her; but anyway here she is, and I must confess a tremendous acquisition to a house party. All the men are mad about her."

Lady Rawton's tender blue eyes and engaging baby face had not been altogether innocent of mischief as she spoke. Kitty Trent was too near her own age not to be regarded as something of a rival—although she, Fanny Rawton, had been married these five years—and the demure little matron was not at all averse to give her "dearest friend" a little suffering.

She it was who seconded Paula's suggestion that she and Gilbert in "The Huguenot" would make a splendid "living picture," and laughed at Kitty's feeble reminder that the woman should be fair.

"Surely, my dear, you're not jealous, are you? Paula and Gilbert will make a lovely pair. I think Freddy's idea of tableaux is splendid."

For the next fortnight Rawton Hall resembles nothing, Kitty declares, so nearly as a private lunatic asylum. Connected conversation is impossible; Gilbert is hardly ever to be met with, save in the agonies of a rehearsal, and habitually wears a worried look. Truth to tell, it is no light matter to drill the members of the caste into their respective parts, for save Paula—a born actress—and Kitty, whose sweet face and *naivette* of manner would make her fortune on the stage, the histrionic ability of the company generally is conspicuous by its absence.

At last, on the day before the eventful evening, there comes a lull. Human nature can bear no more rehearsing, hysterics and bickerings are in the air, Freddy stalks about like the ghost of an injured bandit, and the curate is reduced almost to tears by the snubbing his goddess has administered.

"I can't stand it any longer," says Gilbert. "I've had too much already. For goodness sake, Kitty, let's go out for a stroll."

He is his old self again that afternoon, and Kitty, radiant in sealskin and sables, thinks she has never seen anyone to compare with her lover as he waits at the bottom of the stairs.

He glances round hastily, then lifts her veil and kisses the tempting lips again and yet again, regardless of the fact that the violets nestling at her throat are not improved by the process.

It is a bright, pleasant afternoon, and Kitty's cheeks glow with the frosty air, and her heart keeps time to her happy dancing feet. Is she not with her lover? Has he not told her for the hundredth time how infinitely dear she is to him?

Gilbert falls to planning the future—not so very far away, he hopes—when he and Kitty shall have set up housekeeping together. And Kitty is in heaven, and forgets all the vague unhappiness and dull misgivings she has had of late.

She returns radiant from her walk. Paula stops her in the corridor leading to her room.

"Have you had a fortune left you, Kitty?" she says with a sneering laugh. "One would think you had heard some wonderful news."

Kitty smiles brightly; and even feels kindly towards this woman who has caused her such pain and suffering.

"I *am* happy," she says softly. "Gilbert and I have been planning what we shall do when we are married."

She passes on, still with the smile upon her lips, but Paula leans against the wall, and her face seems suddenly grown old and grey.

"He shall never marry her," she mutters; "never, never marry her."

But at dinner that evening she is the gayest of the gay, queening it in white satin, with quaintly carved ornaments of gold and a necklace of sapphires. Kitty, girlishly lovely in a creation of white chiffon, pearls round her neck and in her golden hair, feels a little envious of that glowing face, until she catches the smile which Gilbert flashes across the table, a smile which says as well as words, "There's no one can compare with Kitty."

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The memory of that smile remains with her through the next day, a talisman against which the whispers and asides that reach her about Paula and Gilbert fall powerless.

"The Magistrate" goes off without a hitch, Kitty creating a furore as the little music-mistress. It is, in fact, a frantic success, and the audience wait impatiently for the promised *tableaux*.

Kitty as "The Fair One with the Golden Locks" is charming; Freddy, to his intense joy, scores a success in his impersonation of "The Bandit at Bay;" other members of the company acquit themselves creditably, and then the curtain rises on "the" picture of the evening.

Never has Gilbert looked so handsome, nor Paula so beautiful. The dark, stern face of the man, the pleading loveliness of the woman hold the onlookers in a spell. Gradually the woman's expression seems to change, her eyes grow agonised, passionate, and over the countenance of the "Huguenot" there steals something of pity, his arms tighten round her, his lips curve into a smile.

Kitty grips her fan tightly, and her heart feels like lead.

"Perfect." "How exquisite." "What a charming picture." Admiration is expressed on every side. Kitty is seized with a wild desire to rush away and hide herself. She cannot sit and listen quietly much longer.

She hurries past the library, turned for that evening into a "green room." She gazes a little wistfully through the open door at the mirror facing her; it reflects a sad, wistful Kitty.

Someone inside the room is speaking. She cannot distinguish the words, but the voice—a woman's voice, thrilling with passion, pain, and the ineffable longing of love, she recognises as Paula Chester's. Kitty has no thought of playing the eavesdropper, another moment and she would have passed by, when a man's voice answers—

"Remember, think what would happen if——"

The woman interposes with a cry.

"Think of *me*, this once. Put the thought of that other woman from you. Think of the years of my sorrow in the past, the years of regret to come. Hold me in your arms, Gilbert, to your heart. Forget all that has come between us, remember only that once I was all the world to you."

She clings to him in an agony. A man were more than mortal to resist her.

He stoops and gathers the clinging figure close.

"Hush," he says gently, "hush," and kisses her softly on the lips.

What Paula says is true. Gilbert Ramsey had loved her once with the unreasoning passion and devotion of a boy. But in those day she was ambitious, she put aside her artist lover, with nothing but his talent, youth, and the dark beauty of his face, in favour of an old and wealthy nobleman. The latter had died during the period of their engagement, leaving her the bulk of his fortune. Then Paula learnt just how much she'd lost in casting Gilbert's love away. For years she had sought to meet him, she was ready to throw her money at his feet, so he would take her in his arms.

And now, now she has found him, and his love is no longer hers!

And yet the memory of those far-off days in Rome comes to Gilbert with a rush of pain. Again he waits for Paula in the scented darkness of a grove of orange trees, again he feels the ecstasy of her first kiss. Her face upturned in the moonlight glows with a strange, unearthly beauty, her arms enfold him in a fond embrace.

His breath comes quickly, he stoops and kisses her again—the woman he loved *once*. Then lifting his head, he sees facing them both, Kitty—the woman he loves now!

It is an awful moment. Gilbert falls back, the situation is beyond him, he cannot cope with it. Kitty's eyes, full of a dumb reproach, are worse to bear than invective, tears, or lamentations. If she would speak, if she would upbraid him, anything rather than stand silent before him, her girlish face white and drawn.

"Why," she says at last, "have you deceived me? I asked you not a week ago if it was not *I* you really loved. It was cowardly to answer as you did, cruel to me, unfair to *her*."

She motions towards Paula, but does not look at her. Kitty does not feel anger against her, pity rather, in that Gilbert has deceived them both.

"Why did you say you cared for me?" she goes on relentlessly. "Why did you tell so base a lie?"

He makes no answer. Of what use to protest, to attempt to explain that it was not love that moved him towards Paula. Kitty would not believe him. Women, he reflected bitterly, attach such terrible importance to a kiss. To a man it means so many and such different things.

He looks from her to the other, rage in his heart. For the moment he hates Paula. Why did she tempt him, why did she soften him by talk of days long since forgotten, buried, *dead?*

"I told you the truth, Kitty," he answers doggedly. "I care the world for you."

Paula flushes and then turns white.

"Why did you——" Kitty pauses. "Oh, answer me," she cried, "have pity on me. Let there be no more evasions. If you and Paula Chester don't love each other, why did I find you a moment since *now*, your arms about her? Why did you kiss?"

For the life of him Gilbert cannot answer. He is not hard enough to tell the truth, to confess that it was not for love's sake, but for pity that he'd acted as he did.

Paula reads the decision on his face. Even for Kitty's sake he will not lower her self-esteem. But even as she realises this, she realises also that she can never win back his love. His heart has gone for ever from her, to a slip of a girl with golden hair and pansy-coloured eyes. It lies with her, Paula, to say whether or no that girl shall pass out of his life. If she keeps silence they will part, they *must* part for ever. If she speaks—a low cry breaks from her lips. Passionate, undisciplined, generous of impulse, quick to love and quick to hate, Paula can rise to heights of sacrifice undreamt of by older, better regulated dispositions.

"It was for pity's sake," she cries, "he kissed me. Yes, for pity. He loved me once, when we were little more than boy and girl, and we were to have been married. But we were poor, and I was sick of poverty, and I had others to consider. My father was old and broken, and my brothers were but children. I listened to my people and to ambition. I flung over Gilbert for the sake of riches, and became engaged to another man. But"—she pauses—"he died—and left me all his money. But ever since I've hungered for Gilbert, night and day I've thought of him. To-night I offered him my love, but he could only give me pity. You, and you only, are the woman he desires."

Kitty listens, her eyes filling with tears. Then as the last words fall from Paula's lips, she turns—not to her lover, but to the woman whom she thought her rival.

"You poor thing," she says softly, exquisite tenderness in her voice. "How you must have suffered. Come with me, dear, I want to tell you just what I think of you—just how much I admire you."

She slips her arm round Paula's waist, and ignoring Gilbert, draws her gently from the room.

* * * * * * *

It is a sad-eyed Kitty that greets her lover on the morrow.

"Paula has gone away," she explains. "Oh, Gilbert, I am sorry for her."

"What about me, Kitty, don't I deserve commiseration? Consider what a terrible ten minutes you gave me last night."

"You deserved it," she answered. "I'm angry with you, sir. You should have told me about Paula sooner. Then I should not have minded, even——" she stops and blushes.

Gilbert smiles.

"I rather question that," he says. "But am I forgiven, Kitty?"

For answer she lifts her face, her eyes are wet. Kitty is very tender-hearted.

He draws her to him, and—they kiss again with tears.

John K. Prothero.

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A Christmas Eve . . . . . in Shadow.

THE TALE OF AN ABDUCTION.

In the first place the ice was in splendid condition and well brushed from end to end, secondly the Squire was the heartiest and most jovial old host it was possible to imagine, and, finally, it was Christmas Eve. Small wonder, then, that the little band of skaters were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

For several days past the belt of trees that bordered the frozen lake had been almost hidden beneath a thick coating of snow. The Grange on the right side, and the little cottages on the left, just visible in the vague December light, were also shrouded in whiteness, and even now, the tiny flakes were again beginning to fall slowly, flung lightly to and fro by the wind.

Recruits were constantly arriving to join the enthusiastic party on the ice. The jingling of their skates sounded like music on the frosty air. It was the work of a moment to seat themselves, to fasten their skates, and then away they glided into the merry crowd.

As for the stout old Squire, he swung himself along at a prodigious rate, to the terror of all who crossed his path. The cry of "'Ware Squire" had become a classic phrase in the district. He was a very good skater "on the straight," but had no idea of stopping or turning. If nobody tripped him up on the way, he generally crashed headlong into the mound of half-frozen snow that surrounded the lake. He was up again in a moment, though, and off in a fresh direction.

It was just as he was picking himself up after one of these little mishaps, that he made a surprising discovery.

The short wintry afternoon was drawing to a close, and the light was fading rapidly. It was difficult for the skaters to recognise each other as they glided swiftly past. When the Squire had stumbled ruefully to his feet again, he found himself in an almost deserted corner, close to where a hole had been broken in for the ducks. There were two people, however, who stood a little distance away, with their backs towards him, who did not appear to object to the solitude.

There is something in the appearance of a pair of lovers that betrays them in a moment. The Squire stood in the gathering twilight and saw two shadowy forms, a man and a woman whispering together. That was all, and yet he knew at once they were lovers, and his kindly old heart was delighted.

But, however pleased he might be at this unexpected love affair amongst his guests, he had no right to listen to their conversation, and so he started away. The impetus of his own weight swung him forward at a great rate, over which as usual he had no control. Unfortunately for his peace of mind, just as he started, he heard the girl say something in a louder tone than previously, and recognised her as his wife's companion. And the voice that answered her, in words that were unmistakably affectionate, was that of his only son!

The old Squire, though the kindliest of men, had a very choleric temper. His beaming smiles disappeared, and his face became almost purple with indignation. The change was made in an instant, like the change of slides in a magic lantern.

The effort to maintain his indignation and his balance at the same time was too much for him, and after floundering wildly for a moment, he collapsed in a heap and slid ignominiously along the ice in a sitting position. His son hurried to the rescue without knowing to whom he was coming. Dora Chassens skated away towards the crowd after a brief farewell to her lover.

"You went with rather a smash that time, father!"

"Yes," answered the Squire grimly, "I did go with a smash. Thank you. I'm all right now."

His son's hurried glance to the rear increased the old man's indignation.

"If you'd like to join her, Tom, don't consider me."

"I didn't know you'd seen us together. It was Miss Chassens."

"Yes, I saw you. And look here, my lad, you must stop that game at once. In the first place, I won't have the girl trifled with."

"I've no intention of trifling with her. She has promised to marry me."

"And as a marriage between you is, of course, quite impossible," growled the Squire, unheeding his son's last remark, "the sooner you begin to leave her alone, the better. You'd better go away for a month or two."

"I may go away or not," said the young fellow hotly, "but I'm going to marry her."

"You shall not marry her."

"With or without your consent, sir. I'm old enough to choose for myself."

"But not clever enough, apparently. However, we'll speak of this later. I see the others are all going back to the Grange."

"I'll come home presently," said Tom moodily, "I want to have a quiet smoke here."

"All right, my lad. I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings, but——"

"Is it any use discussing the question, sir?"

"Perhaps not, at present," said the old man, more gently than he had hitherto spoken. "Then, I'll leave you, Tom. Will you—do you mind giving me a push off?" he added.

Tom laughed in a mirthless kind of way, and gave him the required assistance. The Squire loomed swiftly for a moment through the darkness. When he had disappeared Tom skated slowly to the bank and sat down to take off his skates. At the same moment several men crept from behind some bushes near the lake, and closed stealthily in upon him.

* * * * *

About half an hour later, the Squire and his wife were having a quiet talk in the library at the Grange.

"The girl's all right, personally," said the old man, "I haven't a word to say against her, but Tom must look some-

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where else for a wife. Indeed, I have set my heart on his marrying our neighbour's daughter."

"Yes, my dear," agreed his wife placidly.

"The two properties join so well," continued the Squire, tapping his foot irritably against the fender, "acre by acre together right down to the meadows. And now this bit of a boy and girl affair is to thwart the whole business. There's only one thing to be done, Mary. The lad must travel for six months, and you'd better dismiss the girl."

"She has her living to make," said the old lady.

"Pay her a month's salary—six months' if you like."

"Tom won't give her up easily."

"He must be made to do so."

"He has more than a bit of your spirit, my dear, and I don't think you would have given *me* up for forty fathers."

"Not I," said the Squire affectionately. "Do you remember how the old boy threatened to turn me out—disown me—disinherit me——!" he stopped rather confusedly.

"The cases are very similar."

"Tut, tut, nonsense. You're not in favour of the match?" severely.

"I rather think I am," said the old lady seriously. "Tom is only doing what his father did before him. A girl may be a lady and be fitted for any position in England, and yet according to your words—although I know you don't mean them——"

"Not mean them!" roared the Squire, who, in fact, was beginning to feel rather ashamed of his mercenary ideas.

"No, you don't mean them," said the old lady proudly. "I should be thoroughly ashamed of you if you did. According to that theory a lady is one who has sufficient money to keep her in idleness. Dora Chassens is a very good girl indeed, and a clever one as well."

"But she hasn't a penny to bless herself with," said the Squire feebly.

"Tom has, or will have, enough for both."

"H'm—well—love and kisses—we'll talk about it later—there's the dinner bell," said the Squire.

"All right!" said his wife, who knew by this shelving of the subject, that her cause was won. "I wonder whether Tom has come home yet?"

The old fellow's face was already beaming with smiles again. It was a great relief for him to return to his real self. But as he opened the library door for his wife, a sound of hysterical weeping in the hall broke upon his ears. Guests and servants were crowded indiscriminately together.

"What's the matter here?" he cried testily. "Wilson, has Mr. Tom come in yet?"

"No, sir," said the butler.

"What's the matter? Who's this?"

"It's the new kitchenmaid, sir, Jane Durridge. I was bringing her to see you. She's been to her mother's in the village, and come back all of a fluster."

"Well, what's the matter, Jane?" said the Squire more gently.

"It's—it's your son, sir."

The old man sprang forward in an instant.

"What about him?" he cried. "Speak up—quick."

"I asked if he was home, soon as I come, and they told me 'No,' and I was sure then I'd seen him as I passed the lake," panted the girl breathlessly. "He was quarrelling with some one, and they were standing near the hole in the ice, and I knew his voice, although I couldn't see him. I don't know the other man."

"Bosh!" roared the Squire. "How dare you come frightening us this way? *I* was the other man. We did have a few hot words about—never mind what—get to your work, all of you."

"But this warn't you, sir," said the maid timidly.

"Not me! It *was* me!" he shouted angrily, "Must I take my oath upon it?"

"Then two men quarrelled with your son, sir."

"What do you mean?"

The girl's eyes distended fearfully as she replied—"He struck at Master Tom with a great heavy stick, and the ice broke with his fall, and they both went in—and I screamed and ran away," she cried, breaking down again.

"Take that girl away," said the Squire, "and tell the housekeeper to put her to bed. Wilson, my overcoat and stick, and a lantern, and send a couple of them on to follow me to the lake."

Then he led his wife into the dining-room.

"We must hope for the best," he whispered huskily, "and if it's a false alarm—if we get him back, Mary—he can marry whoever he likes."

The old lady shook her head mournfully as her husband hurried from the room. Dora Chassens advanced from the hall to meet him. Her face was white and drawn, but her mouth was set firm.

"I've sent a man for Dr. Thompson," she said, "and the housekeeper has been told to have a bed ready, with hot water and warm blankets."

The Squire was touched to the heart. "You're a good girl," he said, and stooped and kissed her before them all. "Will you go into the dining-room now? Keep her spirits up whilst there's any hope left."

He made his excuses to the visitors, and then hurried out through the open doorway and down the great stone steps. Along by the side of the house, all carpeted with moving shadows, where the trees rustled their naked branches to and fro, past the plantation, where the path was shrouded in a heavy gloom, at the end of which the frozen lake showed dimly, like a great mantle spread amid the darkness. And there the Squire stopped suddenly, while fear gripped his heart, and turned his strength to deadly faintness.

Something lay silent and motionless at his feet, covered with a long overcoat. The men had broken the ice in several places, and were feeling carefully along the shallow bed of the lake with boat hooks and oars. So far, only one body had been found.

The Squire knelt down and plucked the covering from the face of the drowned man. Next instant he sprang to his feet. "Oh, thank God! Thank God!" he cried, "it isn't Tom!"

Across the darkness, from the other end of the lake, a sudden shout was heard. The old man ran across the ice, over the surface of which the water was rising from beneath.

"What is it?" he shouted hoarsely. "Have you found anything?"

"It's Master Tom's hat, sir," said the voice, and next moment a man loomed suddenly through the darkness.

"His hat?"

"Ay, his hat, sir," said the man. "but Master Tom ain't in the lake. I'll swear to that. It's scarce three foot deep, and we've felt all over."

"Where are the nearest grappling irons?"

"Lower Brannston, sir, ten miles away."

"Perhaps we can do without them. Have the ice broken up and removed, and let a couple of the men put oilskins on, and wade through to make certain."

"Yes, sir."

As they turned towards the side, there was a sudden crack, and the ice, already weakened, gave way in all directions. There was no time to get to the bank. Without a word the two men gripped hands and waited. The instinct that led them to do this, perhaps saved their lives for, as the ice sank, their united weight forced it down, until presently they stood in three feet of water, with the broken places rising slowly around them in the darkness.

It was a strange position to be in, but the Squire and his men soon cleared themselves. With hands still gripped together, they forced their way through the water, pushing the ice to either side, until presently they reached the bank and clambered with some difficulty on to dry land.

Not a word had been spoken since they first clasped hands, but now the Squire turned towards his companion with white, quivering face, and pointed to the water that rippled to and fro at their feet.

"If he is in there," muttered the old man hoarsely.

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"He's beyond our help," said the other. "But you must hope, Squire; I'm 'most certain he bain't in the lake, for we've dragged every foot of it."

* * * * *

Dinner at the Grange that evening was a very mournful affair. The old lady had retired to her own room, where she sat with her companion. If she had felt any objections to her son's choice, that night would in any case have silenced them for ever. The two women sat in darkness, for the flaming gaslight has no sympathy with grief.

There were long periods of silence, broken only by the heart-broken cries of the elder woman. The younger one suffered perhaps more, for young grief is always more poignant, but her stronger nature impelled her to silence. They mingled their tears together, and talked of their lost one as only women can.

Downstairs, the Squire sat at the head of the dinner-table, attending with exquisite care to every detail of his duties as host. His face was white, and the corners of his mouth trembled convulsively when he glanced at the empty chair half way along the table, but he sat bravely to his work without flinching.

It was a mournful Christmas Eve though. Several of the visitors came to him after dinner, and made their excuses for leaving in the morning, which he accepted with a silent grip of the hand that showed his appreciation. Some were for leaving forthwith, but these he asked to postpone their departure over night.

"Before very long I shall have some certain news," he said gravely. "If by some strange mercy of Providence it is good, and there is still hope, the house shall ring with joy as it has never done before. And if we get bad news—God help us, we must bear it as we can," he muttered to himself.

A few minutes later the butler tapped at the door. Before he could open it the Squire was running across the room to meet him, to hear the news from the lake. But the man held out a dirty, crumpled note, without envelope, addressed to Miss Chassens.

"A boy left it, and wouldn't wait for an answer, sir."

"Miss Chassens is with my wife," said the Squire, almost piteously. "What about the lake?"

"I was just going to tell you, sir. They've taken all the ice out and walked right through the water in every direction."

"Well?"

"There's nothing there, sir. They're absolutely certain."

The Squire gazed around him in utter amazement. The suspense of the last two hours was beginning to tell on him.

"What shall we do?" he said feebly, "I can't understand it."

"Send round to the village and ask if they know anything," suggested one of the guests. "Let us all go and search through the plantation and along the side of the lake. He may have climbed out and fainted, or hurt himself in some way."

It was a good suggestion, and everybody in their eagerness to help the poor father adopted it at once. The guests crowded into the hall, hats and overcoats were donned in an instant, the lanterns were lighted, and then the whole party streamed out through the open doorway.

* * * * *

Five minutes later a woman, cloaked and hooded, passed quietly from a side door of the Grange, and running lightly over the snow-covered path, presently reached a wicket-gate that opened on to the Brannston Road. A man who was sheltering beneath the trees stepped forward to meet her.

"Miss Chassens?" he said, and touched his hat obsequiously.

"Yes," was the curt reply. "Which way do we go?"

"This way, miss. I have a carriage round the corner."

He turned and led the way along the deserted road, the girl following. Once he fell back as though to walk beside her, but she stopped and pointed forward with such a gesture of contempt, and such scorn flashing from her eyes, that he hurried to his former place like a beaten cur. And presently they came to a quiet lane into which he led the way.

She stopped and pointed forward with a gesture of contempt.

The girl hesitated for a moment. Was this a plan to decoy her into an unfrequented path, and there rob or murder her as they had perhaps murdered her lover already? A moment's reflection, however, set her fears at rest. Whatever there was about the Squire's son, she was certainly not worth so terrible a risk. If robbery had been the man's object, he might almost as easily have waylaid any of the visitors at the Grange with ten times as much money and jewels as she possessed.

"Are you coming, Miss?" said the man, who by this time had reached the carriage—a ramshackle vehicle hired from a neighbouring hostelry—and now stood with his hand upon the open door.

She hesitated no longer, but ran towards him and got into the carriage. As soon as she had done so he closed the door, kicked the clinging snow from his boots, and clambered into the box seat.

They drove down the lane, and jolting into the Brannston Road held steadily on at a good pace. The snow that carpeted the ground deadened the rattling of the wheels.

Inside the carriage the blinds were all drawn, and what was worse were screwed firmly to the woodwork to prevent the passenger from recognising the roads by which she travelled.

"But I have the revolver, fully loaded," she thought, "and in any case I am going to help *him*—perhaps to save him."

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After driving for over an hour, the carriage slowed down and finally came to a standstill. The driver jumped clumsily from his seat and opened the door for her to alight.

The girl looked round her in astonishment. She stood in a narrow path before a little cottage that was built on the wooded slope of a hill, now entirely shrouded in whiteness. All around her the great trees reared their gaunt heads towards the sullen sky. Their branches, thickly powdered with snow, added to the weird appearance of the scene. Some distance below, in the valley, a few lights twinkled from the narrow cottage windows, but most of the villagers had retired to rest some time ago. She could not recognise the scenery in any way.

"Will you come inside?"

The man who spoke stood at the cottage door. The girl looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, wondering whether she should produce the revolver and let him see she could protect herself. Fortunately for herself and for Tom, she decided to keep her advantage to herself and await developments.

She entered the cottage, closely followed by the man who had last spoken to her. A backward glance showed her that the other man was removing the screws that held the blinds down in the carriage, probably before he returned it to the landlord of the village inn. She felt pleased now that she had scribbled a hasty note during her long ride through the darkness. Probably the driver would not trouble to look inside the carriage before returning it, but she had a shrewd idea that an ostler generally did so before cleaning the outside.

The man led her up the narrow staircase and stopped at the first door. "He's in here, miss," he said, inserting his key in the lock and pushing back a newly fixed bolt. "He's been very obstinate, and won't come to terms nohow."

"What do you mean?"

"We want £1,000, bank notes, before we release him, and he's awkward about it. We wanted to settle with *him* before risking ourselves at the Grange. And so we've taken the liberty, miss," he threw open the door so that the occupant of the room should hear, "of securing another visitor to persuade him to give in."

"I called you a scoundrel before," said the young Squire cheerfully, "but now I think you're an idiot as well."

One man rushed forward only to drop with a bullet in his shoulder.

"Ay, of course," answered the other man shrewdly. "We're going to keep you in separate rooms."

The sudden change in his prisoner's face was almost ridiculous.

"You shall have an hour together," he added gruffly, "so you can make up your minds what you're going to do."

He walked out of the room and locked the door from the outside. In an instant Dora had passed the revolver to her lover, whose eyes brightened at the welcome sight. He placed it carefully in a side pocket.

"I couldn't tell your father where I was going," she whispered, "but I left the man's note on the dining-room table. They're all out looking for you in the grounds, but I daren't stop to say you were safe, because they might have prevented me from coming to you."

"But you have come," he said tenderly.

"I should have been jealous if anybody else had saved you."

"We shall both be out of here before very long. Don't be alarmed if there is a bit of a struggle. It's only make-believe on my part."

Her woman's courage failed her now her share of the work was done.

"You won't hurt any of them with that thing," she said.

"It's very possible," he answered grimly, "but not too seriously. Don't worry yourself, dear. Keep up your courage."

They spoke together for some time, their voices unconsciously falling to a whisper, and then the key turned slowly and noisily in the lock, and the gaoler entered the room. Two other men, the driver and another, could be seen loitering in the passage, ready in case of emergency.

The prisoners stood apart in sudden dismay, scarcely believing that their hour had gone.

"Now then, sir, will you promise to pay up?"

"I don't see why I should," said Tom with exasperating calmness. "You've got us both certainly, but you daren't harm us." He walked carelessly towards the principal villain. "I'll tell you what will happen," he cried with pretended passion, "my father will search the whole countryside until he finds us." He was standing close to his man by this time. The girl, with some idea of his plan, stood apart, resting her elbows on the mantelpiece. The young Squire shook his fist threateningly. "You infernal scoundrel," he shouted, "I've a great mind to break every bone in your body."

"Fair words," said the other sullenly, "or else we'll have to gag you, captain. We can't run any risk of outsiders hearing you."

"Fair words!" scornfully. "Bah! pearls before swine!" he shouted with increasing vehemence.

The two men by the doorway shuffled uneasily into the room.

"We'd better put summat in his mouth," said one of them. "There's an old fellow coming along the path. He'll hear the row certain."

The leader took an improvised gag from his pocket. "I've had it ready all along," he said grimly, "and now it's time to use it. Not as anyone's likely to notice what you say, for I've led 'em to believe you're troubled with D.T. But we've had enough of your high faluting. Lock the door, Bill. Put the key in your pocket—quick, or he'll get it!"

The young Squire's opportunity had come at last. He sprang forward and delivered a terrific blow right in the face of the man who was fumbling to withdraw the key from the lock. The force of the blow flung him violently against the wall, after which he staggered round

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to the other side of the room and joined his accomplices. In a moment the Squire had whipped out his revolver and faced the three men, with his back against the door, which was exactly what he had intended to do.

"Hands up!" he roared, "quick—or I'll fire!" Two of the men obeyed, but the man who had already been struck ran forward with horrible imprecations, only to drop helplessly with a bullet in his shoulder. The room was filled with smoke in an instant. Before the two men had time to make any further move, the Squire's son had the door unlocked, and he and Dora were standing in the corridor, breathless but triumphant. Then he locked the door from the outside, and the next thing they did, with a fine disregard for the proximity of danger, was to kiss each other, not once, but many times!

Afterwards she ran down the snow-covered path to the village, while he remained on guard at the door. She was back again in about twenty minutes, but still by herself. One of the policemen could not be found, and the other had taken a considerable amount of awakening.

He promised to follow as soon as he had dressed himself and discovered his companion.

In the meantime Tom told her how the three men and also the one who had been drowned, were Londoners. Burglars by profession, they had decided to embark in a new line, and a chance newspaper reference had decided their steps to Davyhulme. They skulked about the wicket-gate in the Brannston Road for a couple of days until a chance arrived, which proved both disastrous and lucky. Their accomplice, who tackled Tom and called upon him to let himself be taken quietly, grew desperate at the openly expressed scorn of the latter, and struck at him with his heavy stick. The blow partly stunned the young Squire, who fell headlong upon the ice, which cracked ominously. The other man fled from the danger, and, in the darkness, blundered straight into the hole which had been broken for the ducks.

"He must have been carried somehow beneath the ice," concluded Tom gravely. "As for myself, I was insensible, and they carried me into the road, where they had a carriage waiting."

It was nearly an hour before the policemen arrived from the village, and then they went back at once on the plea that they required a stretcher for the wounded man. The young Squire and Dora were naturally anxious to get home, but the law, or its bucolic representatives, could not be hurried unduly. It was after five o'clock in the morning before the prisoners were safely lodged in the village lock-up, the injured one being carried upon a cottage door, which was hurriedly taken from its hinges for the purpose.

Eventually, Tom and Dora set out upon their homeward journey. The sleepy landlord of the "Britannia Arms," aroused at last by the unusual bustle in the village street, opened his bedroom window.

"Be you a-going to Davyhulme?" he queried.

"Yes."

"Ay?"—a pause of several minutes. "'Cause I might get the carriage ready."

"You might, in about a week," said Tom sharply. "I think we'd better walk. You can direct us there if you will."

"Ay?"—another long pause. "Follow the path till you reach the high road, and then ax agen," and he closed his window and returned to his warm bed, yawning heavily.

It was a lonely walk, and yet a happy one. They dawdled abominably on the way, although the air was bitterly cold, and the road in absolute darkness. You see, they had such a lot to say to each other. It was not that they actually said so much, but lovers can put a great deal of conversation into a mere squeeze of the elbow. However, when at last the snow-covered roof of the Grange came into view, their hearts beat faster, and for the first time during the journey they hurried forward. By tacit consent they made their way towards the lake, thinking to cross the ice, and so save about a hundred yards or more.

* * * * *

It was nearly eight o'clock in the morning. The poor old Squire, who had not been to bed all night, was sitting in his place at the breakfast-table. The note left by Dora had comforted him considerably, while creating a fresh anxiety in his mind. A dozen times during the meal he jumped from his chair at the sound of footsteps passing beneath the window, but each time the footsteps died away in the distance, and he sank into his place again with a groan.

The fact that it was Christmas morning caused him an additional sorrow. To be gloomy on this day of all days, was against all the traditions of his family. He played nervously with his ring, hoping no one saw how his hand trembled.

Suddenly a loud scream resounded through the house. Everybody sprang to their feet and rushed pell-mell towards the door, that is, everybody but the Squire, whose grey head sank helplessly upon his breast, as he waited for the last crushing blow.

Then the door was opened quietly, and two people entered, the others remaining in the hall.

"Father!"

And when the guests presently trooped back they brought such a roaring and cheering as made the old rafters ring again. The blinds were rattled out of sight in an instant, the fresh light of the morning poured radiantly across the merriest party that even the Squire—whose eyes were dim—had ever presided over, and it was Christmas Day at last.

Wal Frank.

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ASTOUNDING SOCIETY REVELATIONS. BEGIN TO-DAY.

HOW I CHAPERONED BELINDA.

By Lady Peggy Carstairs.

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS.

LADY PEGGY CARSTAIRS. A widow, who, having lost all her money in a bank failure, undertakes to chaperon Belinda.

BELINDA NORTH. The beautiful daughter o Hardy North, an Australian millionaire.

CRAWLEY DRUMMOND. Lady Peggy's old friend and adviser.

DUKE OF EASTACRES. A comparatively penni less suitor for Belinda's hand.

DUCHESS OF EASTACRES. His mother.

LORD REGINALD DAVENANT. Another of Belinda's suitors.

LADY HONORIA. The Duke's sister.

DAVID CARR. A young engineer, with whom Belinda is in love.

STANLEY FORBES. A famous barrister, who visits Cairo.

SHEILA KENWYN. Forbes' cousin, whom Eastacres has wronged.

HOW LADY PEGGY FINDS BELINDA.

WHILE staying at the Continental Hotel at Cairo, I lose my fortune by the failure of Hammond's Bank. I undertake, therefore, for the sum of twenty thousand pounds, to chaperon Belinda, the daughter of Hardy North, an Australian millionaire, and to bring about her marriage with the son of some old and titled family. Staying at the same hotel in Cairo are the Duke of Eastacres, and his mother, the Duchess.

The Duchess and I agree that nothing could be better than a union of the Duke's title and Belinda's millions ; we do everything, therefore, to bring this about.

One evening, under the guidance of a fine-looking Bedouin, we all go to witness a religious festival. Some dervishes are dancing, when suddenly Belinda, excited beyond all self-restraint, throws herself into the midst of the fanatics and tries to imitate their weird dance. Instantly all is confusion. The guide snatches Belinda and hurries us away. Belinda is profuse in her thanks, and suddenly, with a cry of "Lady Peggy, he's not a dragoman at all, he's David Carr !" throws herself into his arms.

The dragoman is dismissed and on our return to the Hotel the Duchess of Eastacres takes me to task for the occurrence. I retort that not long ago I saw the Duchess' own daughter, Honoria, in the arms of a real Egpytian !

The Duchess is furious, calls Honoria, and, after storming at her, slaps her face. Belinda rushes in, rescues Honoria and takes her to her room.

Shortly afterwards a fearful shriek is heard, followed by an impassioned appeal for "Help !" The voice is Belinda's !

Rushing upstairs, I discover that Belinda has only just prevented Honoria poisoning herself to escape marriage with her cousin, Mark Striven. Later in the day we go to the Pyramids.

Lord Reginald Davenant, a new arrival at Cairo, accompanying the party, at one time in love with Mrs. Murchison-Lee, now transfers his affections to Belinda. The slighted Mrs. Lee, or "Midge," as she is called, is furious, and threatens violence to Belinda.

I checkmate Midge, however, by abstracting the morphia to which she is a slave), with the hypodermic syringe, from her dressing-case.

That same evening I suddenly discover the Duke of Eastacres and a new-comer, Stanley Forbes, in the midst of a violent altercation. Fearing that a duel may ensue, I rush between the two men.

Sending Eastacres off on some errand, I tax Stanley Forbes with quarrelling with the Duke in regard to a girl named Sheila Kenwyn. She had disappeared some time back ; it is thought the Duke is responsible for her disappearance. An open scandal about Eastacres would interfere with my matrimonial projects.

"Forego a quarrel with the Duke," I implore Stanley, "and I will extract Sheila's address from him."

Stanley consents. With some diplomacy I entrap the Duke into telling me where the girl is.

Next morning I start Belinda and the Duke off to Cairo, and tackle Stanley Forbes successfully in their absence. Later, I return to the Continental and find my labours rewarded. I behold Belinda clasped in the Duke's arms !

On offering my congratulations, however, Belinda repudiates all notion of an engagement with the Duke. She explains that her attitude is one merely of liking for him, and that when in token of friendship she gave her hand to her lover, she found herself embraced.

"I made Miss North a proposal of marriage," says the Duke. "She did not answer me in words, but put her hand in mine. Am I to be blamed if I misread her meaning ?"

I assure the Duke that his conduct has been quite natural, entirely blameless, and represent to Belinda that, after her behaviour, marriage with the Duke is inevitable, as I was not the only one who saw the Duke's embrace, and that unless her engagement to Eastacres is announced she will be looked upon as an immodest girl.

Belinda still refuses to regard herself as engaged, however, and as a last resource I threaten to send her back to her father. She consents under great pressure to an engagement in name only for a month. At the end of that time, when we shall be leaving Cairo, I promise to announce that the engagement has been broken off.

Close on her consent the door opens, David Carr enters, just sixty seconds late.

My influence had obtained an appointment for him at St. Petersburg, and he had come to say good-bye. The Duke lays his hand upon Belinda's arm, and remarks calmly, "We are just engaged."

"It is a lie !" cries David, and appeals to Belinda.

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Then, for the first and only time while she is with me, Belinda faints. I turn the two men out of the room and get Belinda to bed. She asks for Honoria. That ungrateful girl brings a base advantage of my kindness and brings David Carr a message from my *protegée*.

"Belinda says she won't be married for a year, at least," announces Honoria. "Will you please come to her wedding?"

David, greatly comforted at the words, departs.

Our stay in Cairo now draws to a close, the Khedive's ball ending the season. I determine on that occasion to make a public announcement of Belinda's engagement to the Duke.

One night I discover that Belinda's pearls are missing. I go to the Duchess to consult her as to the best means of recovering them. Looking through the door of her room, I discover her Grace in the middle of the room, one hand raised in a threatening attitude towards her daughter, in the other lay Belinda's pearls! The Duchess explains to Honoria that Belinda gave her the pearls to take care of. Honoria retires to her own room and the Duchess proceeds to empty the contents of a trunk upon the floor. It contains all sorts of knick-knacks; amongst them I recognise a valuable fan of mine. The truth suddenly dawns on me. The Duchess is a kleptomaniac! I obtain the pearls from her Grace, on the plea that Belinda told me she was keeping them for her, but she will not give up my fan.

On the night of the Khedive's ball, Belinda publicly declares she is not engaged to Eastacres. The latter follows her to a side room to remonstrate. I am about to join them, when the Khedive enters into conversation with me.

From where I stand I see that Eastacres and Belinda are quarrelling. Suddenly through a door on the Duke's right a veiled woman appears. At sight of Eastacres she screams.

It is Honoria, who is about to elope with El Hamed, her Egyptian lover. She rushes towards the long French windows opening on the grounds. Eastacres darts forward to stop her. Belinda flies between them: Snatching up a lighted lamp from the corner of the room, she exclaims to the Duke:

"Go one step after Honoria and I dash this lamp at your feet!"

This Week's Instalment.
We Arrive in Paris.

To what tragic end Belinda's impetuosity might have led her, there is no saying. It is quite possible that she meant to endanger, indeed, would have endangered, the Duke's life, by upsetting the lamp, had not an unlooked-for turn come into the affair.

The sound of loud and angry voices, men's voices, from the palace grounds, distracted her attention. High above the masculine tumult sounded the thin, feminine tones of Honoria.

"Belinda!" she cried, "Belinda, come!"

At the cry Belinda wavered—so did the lamp. After a moment's hesitation she put down that formidable weapon, and gathering up her skirts, fled through the window in the direction of the tumult.

By this time, escaping from etiquette and the Khedive, I had made my way into the room. I arrived in time to view the end of Belinda's skirt vanishing in the distance.

"Duke," I cried, laying a restraining hand upon his arm, "don't go. Indeed, there's no necessity; Mark Striven is there, he'll look after Honoria. You will only come into collision with Belinda if you put in an appearance. It is much better for you to leave the affair to your cousin."

He hardly had the patience to hear me through.

"I must go," he said brusquely, and with that he went into the garden, whither I followed.

The scene was a strange and a romantic one. The first flush of the dawn was in the sky, the lights of the lanterns growing dim and sickly, paling before the god of the morning. And in that curious half light, under the shadow of a group of cypress trees, Mark Striven, the Englishman, faced Honoria's lover, El Hamed.

Grouped round them, at a short distance, were their followers. Tall, swarthy Bedouins formed El Hamed's body-guard, splendid-looking men, who gazed in cool contempt at the fellahs whom Mark Striven had enlisted in his cause.

"Mark!" The Duke's voice cut through his cousin's flood of wrath. "What is this?" He stepped between the two men as he spoke.

Instinctively they both fell back.

"This fellow—this ruffian," raved Mark, "has the impudence to say he came to meet Honoria. He——"

With a gesture the Duke stopped him.

"You fool," he whispered, "do you want to make the scandal worse? The whole Palace will hear what you are saying. Go quickly and watch the gates, and see Honoria does not pass through. While you were wasting time in abuse, she and Belinda will most likely have got clear of the place. Go!"

And Mark Striven went, the fellahs accompanying him.

"Now," the Duke turned to the Egyptian, "you have apparently some matter of dispute with that gentleman, my cousin. Can I be of any use in the matter?"

At this the Egyptian stepped forward, and, in a passion of Oriental eloquence, poured out his love and adoration for Honoria.

"He was of good blood, the son of an Egyptian lady and an Arab chief. He had command of a tribe, men such as these," and he pointed to the Bedouins at his back. "He had a palace, he possessed the confidence of his Lord the Khedive. He desired the Frankish maiden. He would pay her brother gold and precious stones for her. He——"

Eastacres interrupted his protestations.

"If he would call at the Continental and explain his intentions to the Duchess of Eastacres she would, perhaps, entertain his proposal for her daughter. In the meantime, the present situation, time, and place, were hardly suitable for the discussion." This with a ceremonious bow, that should have impressed El Hamed, but which appeared to have a contrary effect.

"I love her!" the young man cried, proudly defiant (imagine anyone loving poor Honoria!). "She has come to me of her own will, and I will keep her!" He drew a weapon from his tunic as he spoke, and waved it greatly excited. His followers drew nearer, their faces suddenly grown fierce.

I felt a sudden sickening fear of these wild, strange-looking men. It was like a glimpse into those far-off days when Mehemet Ali ruled Cairo by the sword—Franks and natives alike. Civilisation had cast but a thin veneer on Egypt after all. Under the surface polish there lay the cruel, ruthless nature of the primitive people. Cairo—save the Continental—seemed suddenly grown savage.

The Duke, as I have said, was by no means a coward, but he turned rather pale at El Hamed's menacing attitude, and would, I think, have called out for assistance—it being even more important to insure his safety than to avert scandal—had not Crawley Drummond and a few others of our set made their appearance.

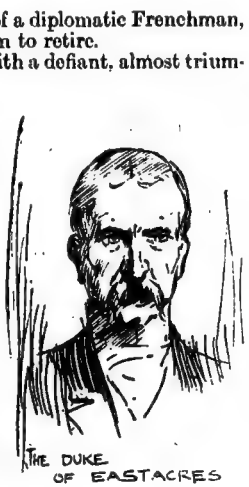
Drummond, with the assistance of a diplomatic Frenchman, quieted El Hamed, and induced him to retire.

He did so with a bad grace, and with a defiant, almost triumphant laugh.

"And now," I cried, "will someone please to find Belinda!"

"My *dear* Peggy," said Crawley, "you don't mean to say that Belinda's been eloping. I thought it was Honoria?"

"Crawley," I cried, "unless you desire to deprive me of my few remaining wits, you will, for once, be sensible. That awful, ungrateful and unmanageable girl, not content with making me the laughing-stock of Cairo, and insulting Eastacres in the presence of the Khedive, that awful girl, I say, has connived at Honoria's misconduct, and has gone off with her—where, I do not know."



THE DUKE OF EASTACRES

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Crawley gave a low whistle; the Duke had already gone towards the gates where Mark kept watch; with feelings of foreboding I clutched Crawley's arm, and went there too.

Mark Striven, the picture of rage and annoyance, was explaining volubly that he had not seen sign or token of either of the girls.

"They must have got out some other way," he said. "There are all sorts of dodges for escaping from this place."

His words struck consternation to my heart. If what he said were true, and Honoria and my charge had eluded him and found another means of egress from the grounds, it was evident they were at that moment wandering about the streets of Cairo—in evening dress and unattended.

If not, and the possibility was almost as terrible, they were hiding somewhere in the Palace or gardens. If this were so, the only means of finding them would be to institute a search—and let everybody know what we were searching for!

Crawley and his diplomatic friend suggested appealing to an official of the household, and in my disturbed mental condition I think I should have agreed, when the problem received an unexpected answer.

Lord Davenant, rather breathless, but very smiling, appeared at my elbow.

"I've had an awful chase to find you, Lady Peggy—couldn't think where you'd gone. I've come from Miss North, she's very tired, poor girl, quite fagged out, and wants to know if you're never going home. She's waiting for you in the dressing-room at the Palace."

Belinda at the Palace! All thought or care of Honoria's elopement left me at the news. In the excess of my relief I almost ran the distance from the gardens to where Belinda waited. For the moment my anger at her conduct in repudiating her engagement with the Duke was overshadowed by my thankfulness at finding her.

"Where have you been?" I said. "And where's Honoria?"

"Why do you ask me, Lady Peggy?" she said innocently. "I am so tired. Shall we go home?"

I looked at her suspiciously. I felt convinced that she knew more about Honoria's whereabouts than that weak-minded girl herself.

I was beginning to realise, however, that my fair-headed *protegée* was nearly as determined as myself—that if she did not want to do, or say, or like a thing, nothing would make her.

I silently adjusted my cloak, therefore, and accompanied by Belinda, swept through the already thinning ball room.

"What, going? So early? How disappointing!" Men and women alike gathered round us, prompted by curiosity—the desire to know the true inwardness of Belinda's treatment of the Duke. I frustrated their desires, however, and reached the entrance-hall without delay. There we were stopped by the Duke and Duchess of Eastacres.

"Lady Carstairs," his Grace said earnestly, "may I ask you a favour? My cousin has discovered that Honoria has gone to Boulag with the intention of embarking on a dahabieh there in port. My mother," he glanced at the Duchess, "is not equal to the strain of accompanying me. As her friend and mine, I implore you to take her place. Your presence will shield my unhappy sister from unfavourable comments. Will you come?"

I could not immediately give a reply. The selfishness and want of consideration of the request struck me as monstrous! Why on earth should Eastacres expect me to chase after his sister at three in the morning? Honoria was nothing to me, except an acquaintance—it was unreasonable to a degree to ask me to inconvenience myself on her account.

Belinda seemed to take a similar view.

"Poor Lady Peggy," she said softly, "she is so tired. Can't she go to the hotel and change her frock first? I'm afraid she'll take cold in this thin affair. Besides," she smiled sweetly, "it's quite possible Honoria may be there herself."

The Duke pounced on the words.

"*Is* she there, Miss North?" he said. "Answer me, please. Do you know that Honoria is at the Hotel?"

The Duke, like most people who came in contact with Belinda, was well aware of her extraordinary love of truth. He knew that nothing would make her say the thing that was not. Had she for once lapsed from her high ideal, framed what realists call "a lie," and boldly stated that to her own knowledge Honoria waited for us at the Continental, that young woman's future might have been different. As it was, habit was too strong for the girl. She hesitated, stammered, and at last, with evident embarrassment, suggested that the sooner we reached the Continental the quicker we should discover if Honoria were there.

This transparent diplomacy, needless to say, deceived no one. The Duke bowed and coldly thanked Miss North for her suggestion, remarking that if she and the Duchess would act on it and start forthwith they would be of great assistance.

Without further discussion he conducted his mother and Belinda down the steps and placed them safely in the carriage. Returning to me, he said, with much abruptness, "I don't ask you to excuse me, Lady Peggy; it is imperative that you accompany me."

The next minute I found myself beside the Duke, driving at a rapid rate through old Cairo in the direction of Boulag—a suburb of the city, with a port, and large, well-constructed docks.

For a while the Duke kept silence; then yielding, it would seem, to uncontrollable emotion, he leant forward, his face working with passion.

"You think I am beaten?" he said. "You are sorry for me and yet a little contemptuous? Was it possible to think a girl could find courage to act as Belinda did? But in the long run even her courage will not save her. I will break down her will. I will tame—subdue her! If it costs me my last penny I will cow her, I will risk all and everything to have and hold her for my own. No one has ever yet insulted and defied me with impunity and no one ever shall. I will break her spirit, I will lower her pride—you will not know her for the insolent girl who put such indignity upon me when she is my wife. For she shall be my wife—she shall find herself trapped, with her life and her beauty at my mercy. Then——" he laughed bitterly, "then it shall be for her to plead with me." He paused, exhausted by the outbreak, and throwing himself back upon the cushioned seat relapsed into silence.

His violence of speech did not altogether surprise me. I had long known that his impassive manner was but the cloak assumed to hide strong passions, fierce desires. That he would keep his word in regard to Belinda I felt sure. He would be determined and unscrupulous in his attempts to force her into marriage. The question for me to consider was how far I should assist him?

I decided to remain neutral for the present. I would not press his claims upon Belinda, neither would I ignore them. Failing other plans, it might be necessary to take extreme measures to coerce Belinda into matrimony. For the time being, however, that course did not commend itself. My old friend, the Marquise D'Arteuil, had asked me to spend the month of May at her hotel in Paris. She would, I knew, be quite pleased to see Belinda also. She had a nephew, the Comte de Sonnaz, a charming scapegrace, with an infinite capacity for wasting time and spending money. Belinda might be amenable to the charm of the Comte—his title was old and his family distinguished. I decided he should come next on the list of Belinda's suitors.

By this time we had reached our destination. The carriage stopped, we both alighted and walked towards the quay.

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The sun was up, the glory of the day fell on as curious a scene as I have ever witnessed.

The docks at Boulag are crowded with crafts from every port.

There you may see rafts composed of jars lashed together. Vessels loaded with senna leaves, gathered in the far-off deserts by war-like Abadiehs, with elephants' tusks, rhinoceros horns, skins of jaguars and giraffes from Khartoum. Dahabieh craft, with elevated poops hailing from Osneh, with ivory, ostrich feathers, gum, and nitre transported from distant Abyssinia. Merchants from East and West, from every climate and every nation.

"Honoria was brought here in a litter," explained the Duke. "Belinda had evidently arranged with El Hamed to have a party of Arabs in waiting the other side of the Palace. They slipped out of sight while that fool Mark was arguing. It appears that the Egyptian has a dahabieh of his own, a gorgeous affair, Mark says, all gold and purple. There," the Duke pointed to a cumbersome sort of craft, "that must be the one. We'll go and inspect her."

The vessel appeared to be empty save for a negro and his small black boy. They grinned profusely, but were unable to give us much information, beyond the fact that this was El Hamed's boat and that he was expected that same morning. The Duke seemed at a loss how to act; I gazed round in despair—I was very tired and terribly hungry.

"It's impossible to search all these," I pointed to the innumerable craft crowding the docks, "and unless we search them everyone there's no chance of finding Honoria. After all, Duke, El Hamed may not be such an impossible match."

The Duke interrupted me with a sneering laugh.

"Pray spare me any more philosophy, Lady Peggy. You seem to forget that Honoria is engaged to Mark Striven."

I bit my lip and accepted the snub. At the same time, had I at that moment seen Honoria I should have turned my head the other way. I was angry with the Duke—I was excessively hungry!

As we were standing at the vessel's poop, undecided how to act, a little launch close at hand began to let steam off, shrieking, snorting, and whistling in deafening fashion. With my hands to my ears, I glanced towards the launch. As I did so, I caught a glimpse of a pink dress, a mass of dull brown hair, and the flutter of a soft, white shawl.

"Honoria!" I shrieked, and clasped Eastacres tightly by the arm.

The girl had heard her name, had seen her brother and myself, and, as might have been expected, immediately lost her head. If afterwards transpired that El Hamed had arranged for Honoria to meet him some miles down the river—she was to proceed on board the steam-launch, he following in the dahabieh. The scheme had been carefully thought out, and with any other girl would have succeeded. No one but Honoria, or an idiot, would have shown herself on deck until they were safely out of port. As it was, her liberty paid for the girl's foolishness.

The sight of Eastacres appeared to deprive Honoria of her last remnant of sense. She rushed wildly down the deck, and, seizing the captain with one hand, waved the other towards us. Her gestures told us she was urging him to start at once.

Eastacres acted promptly; springing over the side of the dahabyeh he jumped into the boat waiting to take us back to shore. Then, hauling me after him, he bade the man row for his life to the steam-launch, already, in response to Honoria's appeals, under weigh.

Eastacres excitedly shook his fist. "Stop," he shouted. "stop!"

The captain seemed to hesitate.

He had been paid for Honoria's passage. On the other hand, the girl's excitement, her hysterical outcries and undignified attitude, unfavourably impressed him. The Duke spoke with an air of authority—an air to which the sailor finally succumbed. The vessel slowed, the engines were reversed; we reached the ship, and scrambled up on deck in triumph!

Eastacres placed the facts of the case in a striking light before the captain. The lady, his sister, was unfortunately not strong—not entirely responsible for her actions at times. This explanation, accompanied by significant gestures, entirely satisfied the worthy sailor, who was ready to hand over the poor lady to her brother's care as soon as possible.

THE LADY HONORIA

The girl herself was more difficult to manage; she appealed to the seamen, rushed to the ship's side as if to throw herself into the sea, screamed for help, and generally misbehaved herself. After a while she grew quieter. Her show of spirit over, she was utterly crushed and dazed.

In silence we returned to the Continental. My presence, as Eastacres had foreseen, prevented scandal. Nobody ever knew the true history of Honoria's revolt.

Two days later she was married to Mark Striven at the British Consulate.

The Continental gave an "At Home" in her honour, at which the Duke made quite an affecting speech.

Everyone was charmed both with the speech and the wedding. Everyone except Belinda and the bride.

Of El Hamed, nothing more was heard.

Mark Striven, the Duke's cheque in his pocket, seemed in the best of spirits.

Honoria, silent and cheerless as a statue, stood beside him, until, just at the last, Belinda came towards her.

Then, with a low cry, she flung herself into the girl's arms.

"Promise me," she said wildly, "promise me, you won't be forced into a marriage like mine. You're strong and brave, not like me—they can't frighten *you*. They——" She broke off and began to sob in a fashion distressing to witness.

"I promise, dear," Belinda answered gently. "I will not marry any man except the one I love."

"Eastacres," said I later, as we watched the wedding carriage out of sight, "there'll be trouble yet with Honoria. You'd have done better to keep her single."

"I think not," he replied. "Honoria's likely to prove useful to me in the future; so is Mark."

He glanced towards Belinda as he spoke, and something of the nature of his meaning darted through my mind. I caught my breath, he frightened me.

If only Belinda would prove reasonable and listen to the Comte's proposals, I decided to gradually drop the Duke.

If not, if she still persisted in her obstinate attachment to young Carr—well, I did not care to dwell upon that possibility! At present there was no need. Belinda and I were going to Paris to meet the Comte. Eastacres was returning to England with the Duchess. The rest of our friends at the Continental, Midge, Lady Saxby, and Lord Davenant, were joining us in Paris a few weeks later on.

We left Cairo on an exquisite May morning. I was glad to go; much that was unpleasant had happened since I came there. I was once again on the fashionable treadmill, compelled to chaperon a wilful girl—to find a husband for Belinda!

Arrived in Paris, at the Hotel d'Arteine, we passed up the steps, through the vestibule, and into the marble hall. The Comte de Sonnaz came forward eagerly to receive us. He was a charming person, and Belinda seemed quite willing to be charmed.

They stood talking for a while. Of a sudden the girl's face clouded. She flushed and bit her lip.

The cause of her disturbance was not far to seek. Down the wide staircase came a slight, fair man—a smile upon his lips.

It was—the Duke!

(An intensely exciting instalment appears next Tuesday.)

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Christine's Christmas Carol.

Which Brought Happiness to Two Homes.

Squire Enderby sat meditating in his comfortable study. Outside the world was covered with a beautiful white mantle; the first snow had fallen, and though it was only the beginning of December, winter seemed to have fully asserted her sway.

And the Squire felt as though the cold of the outside world had gripped him, and was endeavouring to conquer him, and he shivered.

The memory of other Christmas-tides came before him; one by one the scenes of his life passed in silent pictures. The first showed himself and his young bride, and recalled their home-coming. That had been a white night, and the bells from the village church had first pealed forth a hearty welcome to the young Squire and his bride, and then changed their key to usher in the birthday of the Prince of Peace.

The next picture which flitted before him was a very different one. A dim room with a faint sweet scent, that suggested illness; doctors and nurses with anxious, pitying looks, and lying on the bed, as white as the world outside, his young wife. His for only two years, and then claimed by death.

Many other scenes passed in silent review. His little daughter, Frances, with her happy childhood, her affection and love doing much to heal the open wound her mother's absence had caused. Then another, and alas, the saddest picture of all.

Ambition had ever been his besetting sin, and it was due to it, that Colonel Mahon (his chosen crony, and a widower like himself), and he had decided to join their children's hands as well as their many acres. They agreed that Frances should wed the Colonel's Victor.

On the day, however, that the Squire informed his daughter of his plans for her future; to his great anger she refused to give her consent, and quietly told him she would marry none other than Lionel Chesleigh, a poor artist, known to her through being the brother of her greatest school-friend.

Half-beside himself with fury at seeing his cherished castles thus fall, the Squire drove his daughter out of his home, for his violent threats of locking her up until she agreed to marry as he wished, so frightened the girl, that in desperation she ran off to her lover, and as soon as possible they were made man and wife.

That last picture was seven years old, and Squire Enderby's life since then had been bitter and cold; no wonder he shivered for the coming of the merry Christmas-tide meant nothing to him.

If only the old hall could have resounded to the patter of childish feet, the ringing, merry sound of childish voices; if his chosen son-in-law could be sitting with him, talking as man to man, taking the place of the son he had never known, and if his daughter could only have continued to be the Lady Bountiful of the little village, but, instead of that, he was all alone in a dreary and desolate home. And he would never forgive her.

His old friend the Colonel was dead and his son Victor had married a rich American. No one dared speak to him of his daughter except the vicar, the Rev. Wilson, but even his gentle pleading had not availed to touch the Squire's hard heart.

Frances Enderby, now Frances Chesleigh, was dead to her father, and always would be so.

Suddenly he heard a familiar voice, and, shaking off the memory of the past, he greeted his visitor.

"A cold night, vicar, why you look chilled to the bone; have some whisky, man, it'll put new life into you."

"Yes, Squire, I will, we are not growing younger, you and I, and the first breath of winter shows it. But I have come on important business. You know you have ever refused to allow me to tell you anything about Frances, or to read any of her letters, but certain events have happened, which make it imperative for you to know the true facts of the case. Hush! I am determined to speak, after that you can show me the door if you will, but we are old friends, Squire, and somehow I don't think you will."

"Speak, then, but be brief, as the subject does not interest me in the slightest," said the Squire in a bitter tone.

"Your daughter's husband has been very ill, is only now recovering from a bad attack of typhoid fever, and he will be unable to work for some time. As you are aware, he is an artist, and has no private means. His long illness has swallowed up all his hoard of savings. He must have good, strengthening food, if ever he is to become a strong man again, and there is no one but you to help. Frances has been a brick, and has kept the wolf from the door by teaching and doing needlework, but she cannot, much as she tries, do everything. Under the heavy strain, her health too is giving way, and unless you come to the rescue, her little child Christine will suffer cruelly and in all probability she will lose her husband.

"Now, Squire, I want you to do this. Have them here for Christmas, and get to know your son-in-law. You will never regret it, for a braver, more manly, young fellow does not exist; yes, I know, you say he tempted Frances to disobedience, but you must not forget, they were both very young and impetuous, and you frightened them. Let me go home and take them the glad news of your forgiveness, will you Squire? Life cannot be over bright for you now, but with their love, with the affection of their little one, who is the dearest little child you can imagine, with a look of your wife about her, with all this, you would soon become a happy man again."

Then the vicar stopped. He could say nothing further—his heart failed him now, yet he tried to hope for the best for the sake of that trio, whom he had safe for a few days, but unless some one more able than he came to the rescue, they must surely sink. Would the Squire forgive?

"You say, 'let me go home,' Vicar, so I gather you have the brood staying with you; well, keep them there, cherish them, only at *your* expense, not *mine*; not a penny shall go to help them. Take my daughter, Frances, this message from her father—my curse; tell her I pray she may never be happy, may never know real happiness again, that is my final answer. I was her father, had been mother and father both, yet at the first whisper from that poor will-of-the-wisp, she left me, and set my cherished wishes at naught, and gave me up to a lonely old age. I will never forgive her,

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and never willingly set eyes on her again. Take this as my last words—Squire Enderby has no Daughter."

* * * * * *

The vicarage was poorly furnished but it was comfortable and cosy, and everything that it was possible to do for their guests had been done by the kind vicar and his wife.

Lionel Chesleigh lay on a couch, anxiously watching the clock, awaiting the Rev. Wilson's return. Very much did he blame himself for persuading his wife to set her father's wishes at defiance, for to see her enduring such sordid poverty, and to be quite unable to help her, was a bitter pill. And unlike his wife, he had no hope that her father would relent, and then what would become of them all, particularly the little one, now sitting on Mrs. Wilson's knee, chatting about her mumsey's father, whom she wanted to see.

Poor Frances Chesleigh, she could not believe that the father who had adored her would remain obdurate for ever; surely he would relent, and once he made Lionel and Christine's acquaintance, he must love them.

The vicar entered, bringing flakes of snow with him, and one glance at his worn face told the answer he brought back.

No one spoke, till little Christine, seeing his eyes fixed on her, ran to him and said:

"Won't mumsey's dada let Christine sing him her carol?"

"What is Christine's carol, darling?"

"'Christ that once amongst us.' Mumsey taught it to me because when she was a little girl like me, she always used to sing it, and when I see her dada, I am to sing it to him."

"Perhaps you will some day, my child, but not just now," said the good man gently. Surely his friend could not continue adamant, if he held this sweet little one in his arms, but how and what could be done?

That night there was a great discussion between the Wilsons and their guests as to ways and means. It was finally settled that Frances must return to London and continue her work, and thus keep together the little home, and while she did that, they would remain in safety at the vicarage with their kind friends.

"And I'll soon get strong, Frances darling, and then I can paint again, and we'll forget all these hard times," said Lionel, bravely striving to hide how physically ill he felt; but she understood and knew also, that however kind the Wilsons were, their scanty means would be quite unable to provide him with the strengthening food he needed.

And when they returned for the night, the Vicar thought and thought, till presently a smile shone on his worn face, and he uttered a glad "Hurrah." He had settled on a plan to win the Squire's forgiveness.

* * * * *

It was Christmas Eve, and in the school-room of Enderby parish the choir boys had collected, ready to start on their annual round to sing their carols and to receive a very hearty and substantial welcome for the messages of love and peace that they brought.

Amongst them was Christine; her little form dancing with excitement, the golden curls roaming over the dainty little face, which seemed brimful of happiness, for she was going to do something to help dada and mumsey.

"Do you quite understand, boys," said the Vicar, rather anxiously, "Lisle, I depend on you, take every care of the child and leave her at the vicarage after you have been to the Hall."

"Trust us, sir, she shan't come to any harm," the boys answered, and with happy hearts they started.

The Hall was their first destination; though most people said the Squire was hard and cold, the youthful population of Enderby knew differently. He was always kind to them, and after their carols had been sung, they were sure of receiving a bountiful supply of cakes, ginger ale, and fruit, while, as they took their leave, each one would be presented with a new shilling.

They all understood who the little girl was, and many of them could remember the Squire's daughter. Their instructions had been, not to tell the Squire who she was, but, if possible, to let her sing her little carol by herself, and thus gain the Squire's attention. And they were all proud of having her with them, and loved to hear her little voice joining in with theirs, and she herself was very happy.

The Squire was expecting his young visitors, and had left his study windows unshuttered, so that he might see them as they stood and sang.

He knew all of their faces, but the presence of a little girl surprised him. She was a stranger, probably a cousin of one of them, he thought, and he laughed as he watched her eager little face and noticed how heartily she seemed to be singing, and all the boys appeared to be regarding her as a little queen. She was a very pretty child, too, he wondered whose child she was, and what brought her there.

But it was very cold for her, standing out there in the snow, what could her mother be thinking about to let a little mite like that go about singing?

Opening his window, he called:

"Come in, all of you, and finish your singing inside. What was her mother doing, Lisle, to send that child out with you?" And before Lisle could answer he had taken Christine and lifted her on his knee.

But the child struggled to get down.

"Please, please let me sing with the boys! Dada said I must or I would not help mumsey," and, seeing her distress, he put her down, and she went back to Lisle, and stood by his side.

It was a pretty picture; the big room with its beautiful black oak furniture, the pictures all wreathed with ivy and holly, and the fine figure of the Squire seated by a fire of enormous proportions, composed chiefly of logs; the boys standing in the centre of the room, sturdy bright specimens of English youth, and the little girl in their midst, endeavouring to sing as loudly as her companions. In the background the servants had formed a group; they all knew who Christine was, and they all fervently hoped that the Squire would forgive Miss Frances and let her come back to them, for she had been a great favourite.

When the carols were exhausted, with the same zeal as they had sung, the boys tucked in at the good cheer provided, and then Christine suffered herself to be taken to the Squire's side and shyly made friends with him, and graciously accepted the biscuits he offered.

But she was troubled. Something was wrong; they had told her she might sing her carol, and she had not done so.

"Please can I sing you my carol?" she asked the Squire anxiously.

"Yes, dear, if you will sit on my knee," which she consented to do; and then there was silence as she commenced to warble in her sweet childish voice, the hymn her mother had taught her. As he heard it the Squire trembled, for it was the very hymn Frances had sang, when she, too, was a tiny child. Every Sunday she would come and sit on his knee and sing to him and recite her simple hymns. He began to wonder where she was, and if things were really as bad as Wilson had said, and he suddenly resolved to walk down to the vicarage, and perhaps, well, he hardly knew what he would say or do, and then the little voice rang through the room.

"Where none thirst or hunger,"

and a remorseful feeling seized him. Frances and her child might be suffering and in want! He would go at once, and he put the child down gently and kissed her, saying:

"Thank you, my dear, for your carol. Boys, I have to go somewhere; eat as much as you like"; but as he got to the door, he remembered their shillings, and called to the butler to distribute them.

And when he was gone, the old servants took the little girl and made a great fuss of her. They had all been surprised at the Squire's abrupt departure, and all hoped that his heart had been touched by the childish voice.

Down through the snow Squire Enderby went, straight to his old friend. What if he were too late, and Frances' husband had died! But, no, he would not think of that! His forgiveness should be complete; they should all come

(Concluded at foot of next page.)

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TEN MORE GRAMOPHONES.

Here is an Excellent Chance for You.

After reading our opening instalments of "The Albert Gate Mystery," you ought to be imbued with the detective spirit.

Here is an Opportunity for You to Test Yourself.

Below you will find a picture of a room which has been entered by burglars, who have not gone away empty-handed. Carefully study the picture, and find out what has been stolen.

For instance, the disarranged glass shade on the mantelpiece points obviously to the fact that something has been taken from under it. Other evidences of theft will help you in detecting what is missing. Write on the back of a postcard a list of the stolen articles, and send it to the Competition Editor, *Short Stories*, Henrietta Street, W.C., marking your postcard, in the top left-hand corner, "Burglar."

A handsome Gramophone will be presented to each of the ten competitors who send in the most complete list.

All attempts must reach us not later than *first post* on Tuesday morning, December 23rd.

back with him to the Hall, and in their happiness he would be young again.

The touch of Christine's baby fingers had loosened the hard crust that had settled on his heart, and he thought with tears in his eyes of the days long ago, when Frances had nestled against him in the same way.

The vicar and his wife were out, but he was shown into the drawing-room to wait and there on the couch he saw someone lying; someone, who surprised at seeing him, started up and said:

"Where is Christine? What have you done with my child?"

And then the Squire understood it all.

The little girl who sang her carol and sat on his knee must be his own grandchild, and this gaunt-looking man must be his son-in-law. In a few minutes everything was explained, and the proud old Squire was doing his utmost to cheer the invalid.

And the family party was soon complete, for the Vicar brought in Christine, who was delighted to find that her big friend was really mumsey's dada, and was quite content to be made love to by him; and Frances, who arrived shortly after, expecting only to be able to stay just for Christmas and then to return to work, was overcome with thankfulness.

And very soon the Hall resounded with cheerful voices and the patter of childish feet was heard, and there was always the heartiest welcome for the village choir boys, for through hearing Christine's carol, happiness had been won.

And the good Vicar was not the least content at having conceived the little plot.

Robert Murray.

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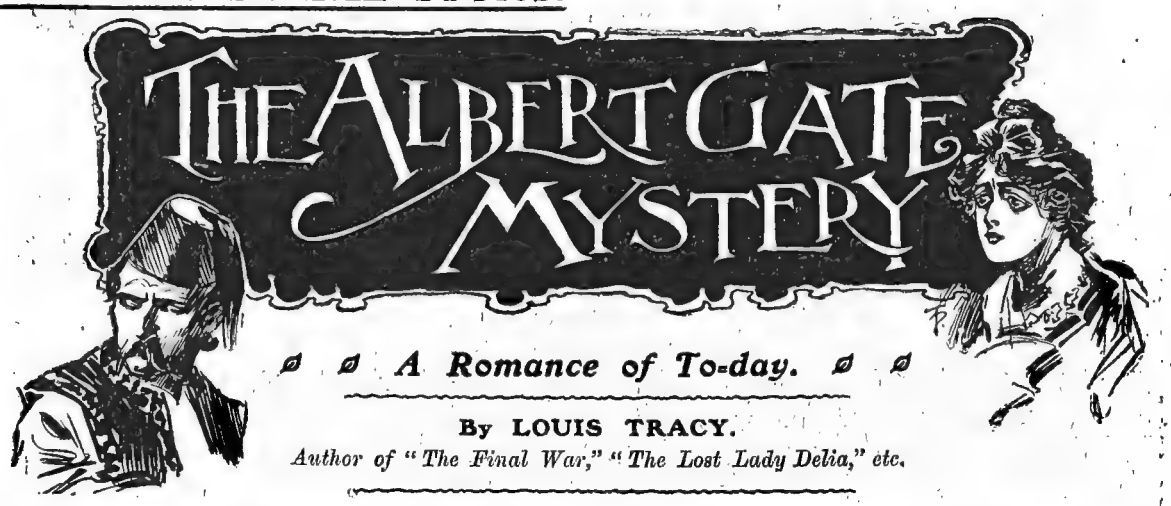
OUR NEW SERIAL STORY.



A Romance of To-day.

By LOUIS TRACY.

Author of "The Final War," "The Lost Lady Delia," etc.

MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE IN THE WEST END.

An affair of some magnitude—perhaps a remarkable crime—has taken place in an Albert Gate Mansion.

Owing to the reticence of the authorities, it is at present impossible to arrive at a definite conclusion as to the nature or extent of the incident, but it is quite certain that public interest will be much excited when details are forthcoming. All sorts of rumours attain credence in the locality, the murder of several prominent persons being not the least persistent of these. Without, however, giving currency to idle speculation, several authentic statements may be grouped into a connected form.

Four weeks ago a party of Turkish gentlemen of high rank in Constantinople, arrived in London and took up their abode in the house in question, after some structural alterations pointing at great security within and without, had been planned and executed.

Attending these Turkish gentlemen, or officials, was a numerous suite of Moslem guards and servants, whilst, immediately following their arrival, came from Amsterdam, some dozen noted experts in the diamond-cutting industry. These were lodged in a neighbouring private hotel, where they were extremely uncommunicative as to their business in London. They were employed during the day at the Albert Gate house. The presence in the mansion, both day and night, of a strong force of Metropolitan police, tended to excite local curiosity to an intense degree, but no clear conception of the business of the occupants was allowed to reach the public.

Whatever it was that took place, the full particulars were not only well-known to the authorities—the presence of the police hints even at Governmental sanction—but matters proceeded on normal lines until yesterday morning.

Then it became clear that a remarkable development must have occurred during the preceding night, as the whole of the Dutch workmen and the Turkish attendants were taken off in cabs by the police, not to Morton Street Police Station, but to Scotland Yard, this in itself being a most unusual course to adopt. They are unquestionably detained in custody, but they have not yet been charged before a magistrate.

The police, later in the day, carried off some of these men's personal belongings, from both hotel and mansion.

A sinister aspect was given to the foregoing mysterious proceedings by the presence at Albert Gate, early in the day, of two police surgeons, who were followed, about twelve o'clock, by Dr. Tennyson Coke, the greatest living authority on toxicology.

Dr. Coke and the other medical gentlemen subsequently refused to impart the slightest information as to the reasons that led the police to seek their services, and the Scotland Yard authorities are adamant in the matter.

The representative of a news agency was threatened with arrest for trespass when he endeavoured to gain admission to the Albert Gate house, and it is quite evident that the police are determined to prevent the facts from leaking out at present—if they can by any means accomplish their wishes.

Such is the statement which Mr. Brett, barrister and detective, reads in the morning paper.

He has hardly finished its perusal when the Earl of Fairholme is announced.

He states that he has called regarding the Albert Gate crime. He is engaged, as he explains, to Miss Talbot, the niece of the late Admiral Talbot, at present living with her uncle, General Sir Hubert Fitz-James.

The Sultan, he continues, recently sent over to England some priceless diamonds in the charge of a special envoy. The diamonds being of political importance, the British Foreign Office places the envoy under the care of Mr. Jack Talbot, Miss Talbot's brother. The envoy is lodged in the Albert Gate Mansion, under police surveillance.

One morning the chief of the Turkish mission, his two secretaries, and a confidential servant are found murdered, the diamonds stolen and Mr. Jack Talbot vanished, though the police are on the premises at the time.

The Earl wants Brett to find Jack Talbot.

In conjunction with the Scotland Yard officials Brett commences operations. A search is first made of the Albert Gate Mansion, Mr. Winter the detective, and two inspectors assisting.

The Piece in the Screen.

During the inspector's running comments Brett had carefully scrutinised each of the windows. He at once came to the conclusion, by a simple analysis of the possibilities, that by no other means than through the barrier of iron wire had the diamonds passed out of the house; but the most thorough examination failed to reveal any loophole by which

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this achievement had been accomplished. He opened each of the windows, tested every iron bar, and saw that the fastenings of the external blind were undisturbed, whilst the fine wire mesh showed no irregularities in its hexagonal pattern, wherein any defect would at once be visible.

"We have done all that long since, sir," said the second police-officer, smiling at the obviousness of an amateur's method of inspection, for it happened that he had never met the barrister before, though he had often heard of him.

"You have?" said Brett, with the slightest tinge of sarcasm in his voice. "Did you do this?" and he commenced to thump with a clenched fist upon every portion of the external screen that he could reach.

"No, we did not," said the policeman, "and I don't see that it is going to accomplish anything except hurt your hand."

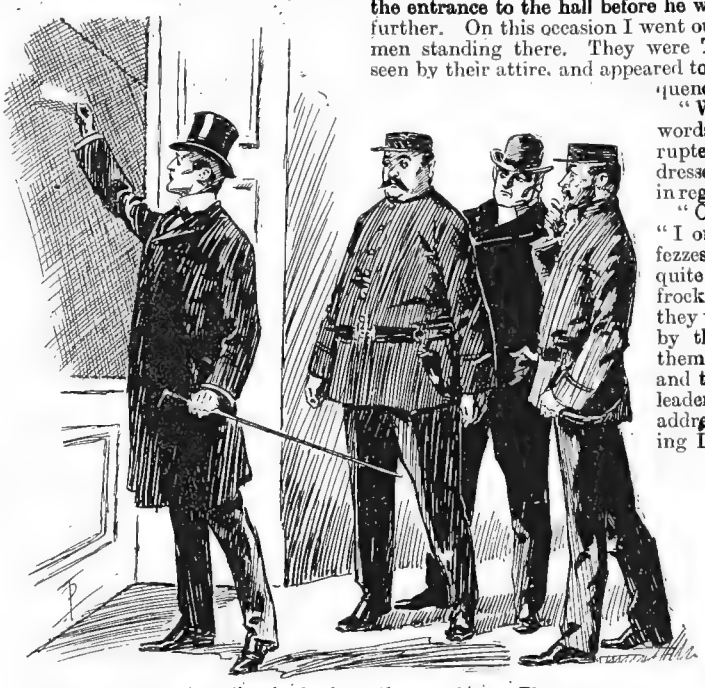
"That may be so," said Brett, "but the diamonds went this way and none other." He tested every portion of one window screen in this manner without effect. Then he approached the second window, and, beginning at the left-hand top corner, did the same thing. Suddenly an exclamation came from the three interested watchers. In the centre of the lower part of the screen Brett's hand made a visible impression upon the iron wire. Using no more force than had been applied to other portions, the blow served to tear a section of the blind about eight inches across. Instantly the barrister ceased operations and, producing a pocket-microscope, minutely examined the rent.

"I expected as much," he said, taking hold of the torn part of the screen and giving it a vigorous pull, with the result that a small piece, measuring about eight inches by six, came bodily out. "This has been cut away, as you will see, by some instrument which did not even bend the wire. It was subsequently replaced, whilst the fractured parts were sufficiently cemented by some composition to retain this section in its place, and practically defy observation. There was nothing for it but force to reveal it thus early. No doubt in time the composition would have dried, or been washed away, and then this bit of the screen would have fallen out by the action of wind and weather. Here, at any rate, is a hole in your defensive armour."

He held out the convicting piece to the discomfited Sharpe, who surveyed it in silence.

It was no part of Brett's business in life, however, to snatch plaudits from astounded policemen.

"This is a mere nothing," he continued. "Of course there must have been some such means of getting the diamonds off the premises. Let us return to the ante-room, and there you can tell me the exact history of events on Monday evening."



Suddenly an exclamation broke from the watchers. The wire screen had been opened.

The Murders.

In less confident tones Inspector Walters resumed his narrative—

"On Monday evening, sir," he said, "about eight o'clock, his Excellency and the two secretaries were dining downstairs, and matters had, thus far, gone on with the same routine as was observed every preceding day. The workmen quitted work at six o'clock. The three gentlemen went out for a drive as soon as everything was locked up, and came in again at a quarter to eight. They did not change their clothes for dinner, so there was no occasion to search them, as no one had gone upstairs since they had descended soon after six. They had barely started dinner when someone called at the front door, and I was sent for. The door bell, I may explain, was always answered by one of the house servants, and he, if necessary, admitted any person who came, closing the door, but the visitor had to be examined by the policeman stationed at the entrance to the hall before he was permitted to come any further. On this occasion I went out and found three gentlemen standing there. They were Turks, as could be easily seen by their attire, and appeared to be persons of some consequence."

"What do you mean by the words 'their attire'?" interrupted Brett. "Were they dressed in European clothes or in regular Turkish Garments?"

"Oh," said the inspector, "I only meant that they wore fezzes; otherwise they were quite accurately dressed in frock coats and the rest, but they were unmistakably Turks by their appearance. Two of them could speak no English, and the third, who acted as the leader of the party, first of all addressed me in French. Finding I did not understand him, he used very broken, but fairly intelligible English. What he wanted was to be taken at once to his Excellency, Mehemet Ali Pasha.

"I said that his Excellency was dining, and that perhaps he had better call in the morning, but he replied that his business was very urgent, and he could not wait. He made me understand that if I sent in the cards of himself and his companions they would certainly be admitted at once. I did not see any harm in this, so I took the three cards and gave them to Hussein, who was crossing the hall at the moment."

"As the cards were printed in Turkish characters, you could not, of course, tell what the names were," said Brett.

A look of blank astonishment crossed the inspector's face as he replied: "That is a very clever guess, but it is so. The hieroglyphics on the piece of pasteboard were worse than Greek. However, Hussein glanced at them. He appeared to be surprised; then at once went into the dining-room, returning with the message that the gentlemen were to be admitted. Of course I had nothing else to do but to let them in, which I did, accompanying them myself to the door of the dining-room, and making sure, before the door was closed, that their presence was expected."

"How did you do that?" said Brett.

"Well, although they spoke in what I suppose was Turkish, it is not very difficult to distinguish by a man's tones whether his reception of unexpected visitors is cordial or not, and there could be no doubt that the visiting cards had conveyed such

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names to His Excellency as warranted the introduction of the party into the house. The six gentlemen remained in the dining-room until 9.17 (I have the time noted here in my pocket-book). They then came out and went upstairs in a body to the ante-room, where they all sat down, as I could tell by the movement of chairs overhead, and in a few minutes Hussein was rung for to bring cigarettes and coffee. This was at 9.21. Hussein was searched as he came downstairs after receiving the order, and again at 9.30 when he returned after executing it. I was relieved at ten o'clock, and beyond describing the three gentlemen, I know nothing more about the business."

"They were well dressed?" said Brett; "they impressed you as Turkish gentlemen by their features, and they wore fezzes?"

"Yes," said the policeman, with a smile: "but there was a little more than that."

"It is of no importance," said Brett.

"But really it must be," urged the inspector. "One of them, the man who spoke to me, had had a bad sword cut across his right cheek, whilst another squinted horribly; besides, they were all elderly men."

"Pardon me, inspector," said Brett, "but you admit, no doubt, that this is a very remarkable crime I am investigating."

"I should just think it is, sir," was the answer.

"Well, now, does it not strike you that the perpetrators thereof, who were not afraid to be scrutinised by yourself and by several other policemen, and to be searched and further scrutinised by a different set of officers when they came out again, would be very unlikely persons to bear about them such distinguishing characteristics as would lead to their arrest by the first youthful police-constable who encountered them. I do not want to be rude, or to indicate any lack of discretion on your part, but, from my point of view, I would vastly prefer not to be furnished with any description of these three persons, nor would I care to have seen them as they entered or left the house."

"Well, that is very curious," said Inspector Walters, dropping his hands on his knees in sheer amazement at such an extraordinary statement from a man whose clearness and accuracy of perception had been so fully justified by the incident of the window-blind.

"And now, Mr. Sharpe," said Brett, turning to the other officer, "what did you observe?"

"I came on duty at ten o'clock, sir; posted my guards, and received from Inspector Walters an exact account of what had taken place before my arrival. Inspector Walters had hardly quitted the house, when one of the junior members of the mission came downstairs with a note which he asked me to send by a constable at once to Mr. Talbot."

"You are quite sure he was one of the members of the mission?" said Brett.

"Perfectly certain. I have seen him every previous night for nearly a month, as the gentleman often went out late to the Turkish Embassy, and elsewhere. I sent the note, as requested, and Mr. Talbot came back with the constable in about twenty minutes. Mr. Talbot went upstairs accompanied by Hussein; Hussein came down, was searched, went down to the kitchen, brought up more coffee, and never appeared again. The next time I saw him was about noon yesterday, when we broke open the door, and found his dead body. At 11.25, Mr. Talbot, accompanied by the one whom my friend has described as the spokesman of the strangers, came down the stairs. Mr. Talbot looked somewhat puzzled, but not specially worried, and submitted himself to the searching operation as usual. The other man seemed to be surprised at this proceeding, but offered no objection when his turn came, and said something laughingly in French to Mr. Talbot, when he had to take his boots off. The two gentlemen went outside and called a cab. Mr. Talbot got in, and the constable at the door heard the foreigner say, 'Tell the driver to go to the Carlton Hotel.' He repeated it twice, so as to make sure the man would make no mistake.

"Then they drove off, and there was no further incident to report until five minutes past twelve, when the other two foreigners came downstairs. Then we had a bit of a job as they knew no English, and one of our men, who could speak French, found that they did not understand that language. However, at last in dumb show, we got them to perceive that everybody who came downstairs had to be searched. They submitted at once, and I took special care that the investigation was complete. There was nothing upon them to arouse the slightest suspicion, no weapons of any sort beyond a small pocket-knife carried by one man, and not much in the way of either papers or money. Before going out one of them produced a small card on which was written 'Carlton Hotel.'

"I took it that this was their residence, so I instructed a constable to see them into a cab and tell the driver where to take them. I also showed them how much money to give the cabman. None of the gentlemen upstairs put in an appearance, nor did I hear them retire to rest. To make quite sure that all was right, I and a sergeant, who looked in a little later, went upstairs and tried the door of the ante-room. This was locked, and everything was quiet within, so we returned to the hall, and the night was passed in the usual manner. Hussein always made his appearance about eight o'clock in the morning, when he came down to procure coffee for his Excellency and the others. As he did not show up I wondered what had become of him. When nine o'clock came, I determined to investigate matters. By that time the diamond-cutters had put in an appearance, and were gathered in the hall, undergoing a slight search preparatory to their day's work."

"How many of these men were there?" said Brett.

"Fourteen exactly. They were mostly Dutchmen, with, I think, three Belgians. Taking a constable with me I went upstairs and ascended to the second storey, where I knew his Excellency's suite was situated, and where I expected to find Hussein asleep on a mat in front of the bedroom door. The mat was there, but no Hussein.

"Then I went higher up to the rooms occupied by the two assistants. Here I knocked, but received no answer. One door was locked, the other was open, so I went in, but the room was empty and the bed had not been slept upon. This seemed to me so strange that I knocked loudly at the other door, with no result. I then returned to his Excellency's floor and hammered at the door, which was locked, sufficiently to wake the soundest sleeper that ever lived. This again was useless, so I returned downstairs and sent off two messengers post haste—one to Mr. Talbot, and the other to the Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard.

"The man who went to Mr. Talbot's house returned first, bringing the startling information that Mr. Talbot had not been home all night, and that his uncle and sister were anxious to know where he was, as they had received no message from him since he quitted the house the previous night at 10.15.

"The Commissioner of Police came himself a little later. By that time Inspector Walters had reached here for his turn of day duty, and after a hasty consultation we decided to break in all the doors that were locked, commencing with that of the second assistant. His room was empty, and so was his Excellency's, neither apartment having been occupied during the night.

"We then returned to the first-floor and forced the door of the ante-room which, we discovered, was only secured by a spring latch, the lower lock not having been used. As soon as we entered the room, we found the four dead men. Hussein, the servant, was nearest the door and was lying in a crumpled-up position. He had been stabbed twice through the back and once through the spinal column at the base of the neck. His Excellency and the two assistants were seated

OUR NEW SERIAL, BEG'N TO-DAY.

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in chairs, but had been stabbed through the heart. The instrument used must have been a long, thin dagger or stiletto. There was no sign of it anywhere in the room, and most certainly none of the men who came out the previous night had such a weapon concealed upon him.

"Doctors were at once sent for and the first medical gentlemen to arrive said that each of the four had been dead for many hours, but they also imagined that the coffee, the remains of which we found in some cups on the table, had been drugged. So, before disturbing the room and its contents in any way, the Commissioner sent for Dr. Tennyson Coke.

"After careful investigation Dr. Coke came to the same conclusion as the other gentlemen. He believes that his Excellency and the two assistants were first stupefied by the drug and then murdered as they sat in their chairs, whilst the appearance of Hussein and the nature of his wounds seemed to indicate that he had been unexpectedly attacked and killed before he could struggle effectually or even call for assistance.

"Of course the diamonds had vanished, whilst in the safes or on the table we found the keys which had evidently been taken from his Excellency's pockets. We were all puzzled to account for the disappearance of the diamonds and the dagger, but you have effectually shown the means whereby they were conveyed off the premises. Dr. Coke took away the coffee for the purpose of analysis. The four bodies were carried to the mortuary in Chapel Place, and the fourteen workmen were conveyed to Scotland Yard, not because we have any charge against them, but the Commissioner thought it best to keep them under surveillance until the Turkish Embassy had settled what was to be done with them, in the matter of paying such wages as were due and sending them back to Amsterdam. The men themselves, I may add, were quite satisfied with our action in the matter. That is really all I have to tell you."

"It is quite clear, then," said Brett, "that two men succeeded in murdering four and in getting away with their plunder and arms without creating the slightest noise or exciting any suspicion in your mind."

"That is so," said Inspector Sharpe ruefully.

"Then," said Brett, "there is nothing else to be done here. Will you come with me, Mr. Winter?"

"Where to, sir?" said the detective.

"To find Mr. Talbot, of course."

"Easier said than done," remarked Inspector Walters, as the door closed behind them.

Inspector Sharpe was less sceptical.

"He's a very smart chap is Brett," he said. "Neither you nor I thought about punching that wire-screen, did we?"

A Startling Clue.

Once clear of the Albert Gate mansion, the barrister was bound to confess to a sense of indefiniteness, a feeling of uncertainty, which seldom characterised either his thoughts or his actions. He admitted as much to his companion, for Brett was a man who would not consent to pose under any circumstances.

"It is quite true," he explained, "that our first duty must be to find Mr. Talbot, and it is still more certain that we will be able to accomplish this part of our task, but there are elements in this inquiry which baffle me at present."

"And what are they, sir?" said the detective.

"I fail to see," replied Brett thoughtfully, "why Mr. Talbot was dragged into the matter at all. On the straightforward assumption that Turks were engaged in the pleasant occupation of taking other Turks' lives—an assumption to which, by the way, I attach no great amount of credence—why did they not allow Mr. Talbot to go quietly to his own home? It was not that they feared more speedy discovery of their crime. The hour was then late; it was tolerably certain that he would make no move which might prove injurious to them until next morning, and then the whole affair was bound to be discovered by the police in the ordinary course of events."

"I don't quite follow you, sir," said Winter, with a puzzled tone in his voice. They had, for the sake of quietude, turned into the Park, and were now walking towards Hyde Park Corner. "What do you mean by saying that Mr. Talbot would make no move in the matter until next morning?"

"Oh, I forgot," said Brett. "Of course you don't know why the diamonds were stolen?"

"For the same reason that all other diamonds are stolen, I suppose."

"Oh, dear no," laughed the barrister. "This is a political crime."

"Political!" said the amazed policeman.

"Well, we won't quarrel about words, and as there are perhaps no politics in Turkey, we will call it dynastic or any other loud-voiced adjective which serves to take it out of the realm of simple felony. Why? I cannot at this moment tell you, but you may be perfectly certain that the disappearance of those diamonds from the custody of Mehemet Ali Pasha will not cause the Sultan to sleep any more sound of nights."

"What beats me, Mr. Brett," said the detective, viciously prodding the gravel path with his stick, "is how you ferret out these queer facts—fancies some people would call them, and that is what I myself used to do until I knew you better."

"In this case it is simple enough. By mere chance I happened to read this morning that there had been some little domestic squabble in Royal circles at Constantinople. I don't know whether you are acquainted with Turkish history, Mr. Winter, but it is a well-recognised principle that any Sultan is liable to die of diseases which are weird and painfully sudden; for instance, the last one is popularly supposed to have plunged a long pair of scissors into his jugular vein; others have drunk coffee that has disagreed with them, or smoked cigarettes that were too highly perfumed. In any case, the invariable result of these

"When we burst open the door we found four dead men."

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eccentricities has been that a fresh Sultan occupied the throne. Now, don't forget that I am simply theorising, for I know no more of this business than you do at this moment, but I still think that you will find some connection between my theory and that which has actually occurred. At any rate, I have said sufficient to prove to you the importance of not being too ready to make arrests."

"I quite see that," was the thoughtful rejoinder. "But you must not forget, sir, that we in Scotland Yard are bound by rules of procedure. Perhaps you will not mind my suggesting that a word from you to the Foreign Office might induce the authorities to communciate officially with the Home Department, and then instructions could be issued to the police, which would leave the matter a little more open than we are able to regard it under the existing conditions."

"I will see to that," said the barrister. "When does the inquest take place?"

"This evening at six."

"It will be adjourned, of course?"

"Oh, yes; no evidence will be given beyond what is necessary for purposes of identification, and this can be supplied by the police themselves and an official from the Turkish Embassy."

"Very well. You will mention to no one the theory I have just explained to you?"

"Not if you wish it, sir."

"I do wish it at present. Which way are you going?"

"Straight to the Yard."

"In that case I will accompany you a portion of the distance."

They had now reached Hyde Park Corner, and, hailing a hansom, Brett told the driver to stop outside the Carlton Hotel. The man whipped up his horse and drove in the direction of Constitution Hill, evidently intending to avoid the congested traffic of Piccadilly and take the longer, but more pleasant, route through the Green Park and the Mall.

"By the way," said Brett, "did the driver of the hansom which conveyed Mr. Talbot and his companion from Albert Gate on Monday night tell you which road he followed?"

"Yes," said the detective, "he followed the same road that this chap is taking."

Brett rubbed his hands, with a queer expression of thoughtful pleasure on his keen face.

"Ah," he said, "I like that. It is well to be on the scent."

"You mean," laughed the other, "that we are acting as sleuth hounds, because that is what the American novel-writer generally calls detectives."

"The simile will suffice," said Brett. He did not explain to his professional *confrère* that it was a positive stimulant to his abounding energy and highly-strung nerves to find that he was actually following the path taken by the criminal whom he was pursuing. The mere fact lent reality to the chase. For a mile, at any rate, there could be no mistake, though he might expect a check at the Carlton. Arrived there, Brett alighted.

"Are you going to make any inquiries in the hotel, sir?" said Mr. Winter.

"Why should I?" said Brett. "You have already ascertained from the management that no person, even remotely resembling any of the parties concerned, is staying at the hotel."

"Yes, confound it, I know I did," cried the other, "but I never told you so."

"That is all right," laughed Brett. "Come and see me at my chambers this evening when the inquest is finished. Perhaps by that time we may be able to determine our plan of action."

(A further long instalment of this splendid tale will be published next Tuesday.)

Why they Were Glad.

Tommy: "So glad you've come, Mr. Bowlegs!" Mr. Bowlegs (fishing for compliments): "And why are you so glad I've come, my little man?" Tommy: "Ethel and I are playing at trains, and you'll make such a lovely bridge."

YOUR EDITOR CHATS.

I must first of all say that I sincerely hope that you feel you have got full value for the twopence which you have laid out on this number of Short Stories. I may say that many busy brains have been at work on it for months past. Your favourite authors have been thinking out their best ideas and putting them to paper; the Sub-Editors have been busily reading the thousands of stories that have come into this office and selecting the best; while your Editor has been busy choosing the cream of the cream of these stories and in planning the number itself. If you are pleased with the result, then we, on our side, shall feel that the enormous amount of work, time and money expended in producing the copy you hold in your hands have not been wasted.

One special feature which I have made in this number is the offer of a greatly increased number of prizes. The Gramophones, which have been going out for several weeks past at the rate of ten a week, have been so much appreciated that I feel constrained to increase the number in order that those who have not already secured the instruments may have a greater opportunity of doing so.

I have received a remarkable letter from an anonymous reader of Short Stories. It is one of the most curious letters that I have ever had. It will be found on page 815. The writer, as you will see, received a prize of £10 from Short Stories about eight years ago, and this £10 proved the foundation of a big fortune. He now writes over from America inclosing dollar bills to the value of £50, and asks that this money may be distributed amongst readers in sums of £10 under conditions which he leaves to me. The letter has only just come to hand, and I therefore hasten to publish it at once. By next week I shall have thought out some satisfactory manner in which to distribute the money.

You will doubtless notice that on page 798 I have started the promised "Love Problem Series." I should be glad to know what you think of the first one, and if you have any problem of this kind you would like solved, let me know, and if I think the subject suitable, a story with its solution will be given you.

Before finishing up this week I would like to say that one of the stories in this number was written under very pathetic circumstances. There is no space to give you particulars of the case here, but I have had the permission of the author to tell you the whole story next week. It is one in which payment for the tale was the means of keeping a home together this Christmas.

TO NEW READERS, GREETING!

There are doubtless several thousands of people who have been attracted to buy this number of *Short Stories* for the first time in their lives. It is to such new readers that I would like to say something about the paper.

This is, as you are already aware, a double number of the ordinary issue, which usually consists of half a dozen or more complete tales and an instalment of a powerful serial story. *Every* issue bears a coloured illustrated cover, and is just as daintily and as choicely got up as the copy you hold in your hands. All the fiction is carefully selected, and is written by authors who have made names for themselves in the world of popular literature.

It is not for me to try and influence you in any way in your opinion of the stories which appear in this number, but I would ask you very specially to read the article entitled "How I Chaperoned Belinda." It is one of a series of articles revealing the secrets of life in High Society at home and abroad—the most remarkable series ever published.

I sincerely hope that the little paper will commend itself sufficiently to you to induce you to continue taking it in every week in future.

Your Editor.

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Love Problem No. 1.

BEHIND THE SCREEN.

Ought a Man to Give Up All His Bachelor Pursuits Upon Marriage?

"What is it, Mary?"

"Mr. Hunt and another gentleman to see master, please."

"Didn't you tell them Mr. Mowbray hasn't come home yet?"

"Yes'm, and they said they'd wait. I've shown them into the drawing-room."

"Very well; I shall be down in a moment."

"The gentlemen told me not to disturb you, but I thought you would like to know they were here."

"Thank you, Mary."

"Will the gentlemen stay to dinner?"

"No, I hope—I mean, I think not. You may sound the gong at the usual time. Don't forget, please."

"No'm, I won't forgot." And Mary smiled significantly to herself as she retired to the kitchen. This would not be the first time she had been called upon to sound the dinner gong at Holly Lodge as a gentle hint to visitors that it was time for them to go.

Mary had discovered long ago that hospitality to "master's friends" was not one of her young mistress' virtues.

"And I don't blame her, neither," said Mary to herself; "it's only natural she shouldn't want them always hanging around and taking master's attention off of herself, and she only married six months."

Mrs. Mowbray gave a little petulant sigh.

"I suppose I must," she murmured, addressing her looking glass with a frown. And then she began to smile, half reluctantly, at the face she saw reflected there.

It was a pretty face. The frown clouded the prettiness, but the smile made it bewitching. Yet Mrs. Mowbray frowned almost as often as she smiled. But then so many things happened to annoy her.

Harry was a dear boy, of course, but—well, he certainly had his faults. What made him so late to-night, for instance? Surely he hadn't gone off again to play chess with that horrid Bob Jollibois, as he did only the other week.

But, no, he wouldn't be so selfish and horrid when he knew perfectly well how unhappy it would make her. She had told him so when he came home at half-past eight that other night, and he had vowed never to do it again.

Harry was a man of his word; she would say that for him. He had promised before they were married, to give up that hateful volunteering and football that always took up so much of his time, and he had kept his promise so far, though she was quite sure Bob Jollibois and the others were doing their best to tempt him to break it.

What was keeping him this evening? She had never felt quite easy in her mind since she found out that Harry was still a member of the Jackdaw's Club. He had quite agreed with her when she declared that a married man with a comfortable home of his own, had no business to go to a club, but, all the same, he had not resigned his membership. He had explained to her that it would be shabby to do so and that paying a subscription to a club was a mere matter of form. He had never been near the place since, it is true. Still, she would have been happier had he severed his connection with the Jackdaws altogether.

The club was a link with his bachelor days, in which she had had no part, and she resented it as such.

The two men waiting downstairs were links of the same sort. They had known Harry when he was still a stranger to her, and they could talk to him of things that had happened before he had ever met *her*. It made her feel vaguely aggrieved. She would not have admitted it in so many words, but it always pained her a little to think that Harry could ever have had any absorbing interests and thoughts outside herself.

Though she laughed to herself she liked to cherish a delusion which Harry's friends always seemed to destroy—to wit, that Harry's life had been a dead and dreary blank before *she* came into it.

Mrs. Mowbray seized her silver-backed hair-brush—Harry's latest present—and administered half a dozen impatient and quite unnecessary dabs to her pretty, fluffy hair.

"I suppose I must," she sighed again, and tripped lightly downstairs prepared to be civil to her husband's visitors.

"Poor old Mowbray! Take warning by him, Bundy, and don't get married."

"I don't mean to. But how about yourself, eh?"

"Oh Nell's one in a thousand she's not like Mrs. Mow—but, I say, I suppose one mustn't abuse a man's wife in his own house. And I daresay she's a charming little woman, really—but a bit jealous. Anyway, he adores her."

"Evidently. A man must be pretty far gone to give up everything, as Mowbray has done. You don't think he'll come to the smoker?"

"No—I'm afraid he won't. Since he's been married he can't be induced to spend an evening away from her."

"Poor old Mowbray. He's bound to get tired of it."

"Yes, a man wants a little change, even if he's married an angel. Human nature can't stand monotony."

"Adam's relying on Mowbray to sing. The follows will be horribly disappointed if he doesn't."

"So will Mowbray himself. He used to be uncommonly keen on it. Of course, he'll refuse, simply because he's afraid of hurting his wife's feelings."

"It strikes me he's carrying devotion a bit too far. Why, he seems to have thrown over every blessed thing he ever cared for. The Growlers are furious at his desertion. They've lost their best half-back. And old Harding was grumbling to me, only last night, because Mowbray hasn't put his nose inside the School of Arms for months."

"That must have been a blow to Mowbray, to give up those bayonet competitions. He was a dead certainty for at least one prize."

"It's the same with everything. He's losing his form all round. It's a sin that such a good sportsman should be allowed to run to seed; and a woman who makes her husband sacrifice all his pet hobbies must be——"

The speaker paused expressively.

"Well, of course, we don't *know* that it's her fault. He never so much as hinted at it. Pretends he's dropping out of things to please himself."

"But who believes that?"

"Nobody! Oh, you're quite right. It *is* my fault!"

It was not Jack Hunt's voice that answered his friend, Bundy's question.

The two men turned to the speaker with startled faces.

It was Mrs. Mowbray, who detached herself from the shadow of the screen at the door, and came towards them with outstretched hands.

"It was mean to listen," she said, flushing all over her pretty face, "but I couldn't help it. You didn't hear me come in, and—something you said—made me wait, and so I—I overheard. Oh, please don't think me a—a cat," she added hurriedly, "but when you said that about taking warning by Harry, and not getting married, it—it wasn't in human nature not to listen. I've been thoughtless and selfish. It's done me good to hear the truth. Won't you shake hands?"

Ten minutes later, when Harry Mowbray came home, he was amazed to find that his wife had set her heart on his singing at the Jackdaws' Smoker, and when she insisted on his spending the entire following evening at the club, it dawned upon him that something extraordinary had happened.

Grete Hahn.

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MY CLIENT.

The Tale of a Will.

"COME in," I mumbled.

Another knock.

"Come in," I shouted with irritation at the repeated summons, oblivious of the fact that a heavy dray passing drowned all except top note utterances.

But the vision which did enter was a most unexpected one. Young, beautiful, carrying in one little gloved hand a great bundle of frills and lace which could not be allowed to do the charwoman's work over my office floor. She was streaming with chains and charms, and nodding with plumes, like a lawyer's visitor on the stage, perhaps, but not such as usually climbs the narrow, bare staircase to a genuine solicitor's office in a city bye-way.

Of course I bounded to my feet like an indiarubber ball, feeling a worm in my working coat, and, as I politely placed the one spare chair in a new, but no more convenient position, I had a terrible fear that good Mrs. Smith might have overlooked its dusting on that particular morning.

"You are surprised to see me?" my visitor said with a little smile, which had a good deal of amusement in it as well as graciousness, no doubt from perceiving the embarrassment with which I had received her.

"Well, madam," I said gallantly, "these dingy chambers are not often honoured by visits from the fair sex, but things which are rare are always most highly prized."

She looked at me calmly through her big grey eyes, and I felt I must stand or fall in her estimation by the scrutiny.

"I have come to consult you," she said, removing her eyes from me to the circle she was describing on the table with her finger, "about—about my husband."

How had I been fool enough to imagine she had not been snared before she was out of the nursery?

"Yes?" I murmured dubiously.

"I haven't got one," she said, looking up quickly.

"Oh!" I replied. "The two statements require reconciliation."

"No," she replied, "that is just it—I don't want to marry. All boys are savages, and all men are brutes."

It was an insult, of course, but there was nothing one would not have borne from those smiling lips, revealing a shimmering row of pearls. I bowed.

"You agree," she laughed. "I am glad. Well, the next thing to tell you is that I am very poor."

I knew that costly jewels, priceless lace, Worth's gowns, and Paris millinery often did represent extreme poverty, so I again inclined my head.

"It is very hard to talk while you are so silent," she said pettishly. "I suppose I had better begin at the beginning and tell you the whole long story, and then I won't notice your silence."

"Yes," I assented. "That would be the best way."

"Well," she resumed, knitting her brows together with a delightful piquancy, "my name is Mildred Leslie, and my father and mother dying when I was quite a child, I was adopted and brought up by a brother of my mother's. He was immensely wealthy, and I always had everything I wished for. Upon one point only we differed, or rather agreed, and that was marriage. I shared his horror of it, but he had a theory that all women should marry, and all men should not, though how he suggested this plan should be carried out he never explained. Well, a few months ago, he died, leaving me all he possessed as I was his only near relation, but—ah, this is the dreadful part," she interjected quizzically, "only on condition that I was married within a year after his death. I was to be given a thousand pounds as an income for the year, and if I was not married by the end of it, the whole of his property was to be sold and go to pay off the National Debt!"

"I think the conditions are such as few young ladies would grumble at," I said guardedly.

"Well, I am one of the few, then," she answered snappishly, "and that is not the kind of opinion I have come to ask you for."

I bowed and waited.

It was evident that my fair client had to be treated with caution.

"The case is this—I am the only near relative he had, so if we can only break the will by proving he was not right in his mind, I will come in as heir-at-law, and no one will be a bit the worse."

"You cannot abide by the conditions? Breaking a will is not an easy matter!"

"No, I should not have consulted you if I had meant to do so. He was very eccentric, and there will be no one to oppose us. I went to his solicitors, but they were shocked at the suggestion, and refused to act for me, so then I asked the Clares, whom you know, and Mrs. Clare gave me your address."

"It was very kind of her to mention me," I said, with a glow of professional gratitude to my friend's wife.

Miss Leslie looked at me steadily for a moment, as if gauging my vanity, and then, with amusement creeping again into her grey eyes she added—

"She said you were so good-looking. If you had been a woman I should not have told you, but a man it could only aggravate."

She looked at me with a most whimsical expression, and, though I longed to avenge the wound to my professional vanity, I could not find it in my heart to be annoyed with my tormentor.

I did the best thing that remained for me to do under the circumstances, I laughed, and she joined me.

"That is right," she said. "I think you will do. Get me through this, and I shall be everlastingly grateful."

With a few more necessary details she gathered her purse and frills again into her tiny hand and swept away, taking my sunshine with her.

I worked hard to earn that gratitude, poor reward though it was in compensation for the heart that she so quickly took into her possession. No one brought into daily contact with Miss Leslie could help loving her. She had the winsome waywardness of a spoilt child, with the imperiousness of an empress, but now and again traits of what is best and noblest in woman would suddenly appear at unexpected moments, and be as quickly hidden out of sight again, as if the owner was ashamed of possessing any of the softer feminine qualities.

It was a tedious and endlessly technical case, but it was pulled through at last, adding not a little to my own reputation.

Mr. Biddulph having certainly been a man of eccentric habits it was not hard to bring in a verdict of an unsound mind, no one being particularly interested in proving he was sane.

But my success was as nothing to the greyness of the future when my heart's darling should have passed out of

my life, and at most I should be privileged with an occasional call as her legal adviser. It was the morning after we had won that I sat in my dreary office awaiting the woman who had so frequently brightened it of late.

The case had made a tremendous sensation. Columns of the morning papers were devoted to the beautiful heiress and her mad uncle, while the evening placards had contained nothing else, and one enterprising journal advertised an interview with Miss Leslie herself.

I knew so well how she was revelling in her notoriety, and I—well, I was just the solicitor of the case!

A knock came to disturb my somewhat morose meditations, but it was far too loud to be mistaken for the gentle tap which always preceded my fair client's entry.

In answer to my summons an elderly man came in, leaning heavily upon a gold nobbed stick. He was unmistakably a retired military man, so that I was not surprised when he announced himself as Colonel Wyatt.

"Mr. Mervyn Ray, I believe?" he queried.

"That is my name, sir," I said, "will you take a chair?"

Having seated himself with some apparent difficulty upon the one to which I waved him, he fixed on me a somewhat eagle eye, and began.

"Sir, I have come to perform a duty."

This, of course, could herald nothing but an unpleasant communication, so I merely bowed and waited.

"You are, I believe, the solicitor who acted for Miss Leslie in yesterday's will case?"

My heart beat faster, in spite of my professional calm as I assented.

"The will having been broken, the young lady inherits as heir-at-law?"

"That is so," I said, shuffling some papers on the table to cover the growing uneasiness I felt at these preliminary remarks.

"I have come to you first, Mr. Ray, as a matter of form, but, of course, the interests of your client will very properly be your first consideration. I see, however, by reading the account of the proceedings yesterday, it was stated that Mr. Biddulph was a bachelor. That, however, is not correct. He was a widower, and, at one time of his life, there was a son of his marriage living. Now, if that boy is alive, or has left heirs, for he would be thirty-five or six if alive, they would be the inheritors of Mr. Biddulph's estate!"

He said it all so quietly, and seemed so sure of his facts, that I felt the blood leaving my face. I had more than a legal interest in the case. It was a terrifying thought to me that I should have helped this girl to compass her own ruin, while some nameless outcast was to inherit the fortune which became her so well. I rose from my chair and walked over to the window. The action cleared my brain. I turned again to Colonel Wyatt.

"I cannot, of course, combat the truth of what you have stated, for I am entirely ignorant of the whole matter as you know, but if you will be good enough to furnish me with the details of the case, I shall then be in a better position to judge the best course to pursue."

"In the interests of Miss Leslie?"

"I have the honour to represent her!"

"Quite so," he said. "Well, I am afraid I do not remember all the names as I ought to. I had a touch of the sun in India, and my memory is not as good as it might be, but no doubt others will be able to fill up the blanks. What I am going to tell you happened about thirty-four years ago, when I was stationed at Halifax with my regiment. It was here I first met Mr. Biddulph and his lovely young wife. But that was not his name then, for he took that some years later, from the great property he inherited from a distant relation, and at this time he was miserably poor. She was a most beautiful creature, and he treated her like the bear he was. Used actually to beat her, I believe, and was madly, insanely jealous. They had one little son about a year old, and, when the regiment moved to Bermuda, she and the kid came too, under the protection of Captain Goldie, one of our fellows, who was desperately in love with her. We naturally concluded her husband would get a separation, but this he refused to do, merely washing his hands finally of both wife and child. A few months later, Goldie and the woman he adored took fever, and were both dead within a week, leaving the child in a perfectly destitute condition. The father was written to, but never replied, and, in the meantime, a missionary and his wife took the boy in. Goldie had been exceedingly popular, and there was a general reluctance to cast the child off for his sake, so it ended by our subscribing about a hundred pounds to maintain him until the clergyman could get him into some home. Shortly after that I came back to England, and I heard no more of the matter until seeing the account of yesterday's trial, in this morning's paper, brought the matter to my mind."

I had leant my head on my hand while he was speaking, and I now looked up.

"This happened a long time ago, Colonel Wyatt. This boy has, no doubt, been well provided for and started in life, does it not seem a pity to rake up old scandals to provide an able-bodied man with wealth he does not expect, and to turn out a beautiful girl into the world totally unfitted for battle, and with absolutely no means of earning a livelihood?"

"Oh, of course, I expected you would plead for your client," he said, with a short laugh, "but she has only herself to blame, why did she not accept her uncle's conditions? You refuse, then, to help in the search for Mr. Biddulph's son? It is what I anticipated!"

"On the contrary," I said quietly, "he shall be made aware of his position."

He looked at me with grave doubt, trying to fathom the legal depth of my assertion. He passed his hand over his forehead.

"I wish I could remember that missionary's name," he said, "but it has gone. I think it began with B."

"Bradley," I suggested.

"Bradley—Bradley, by Jove it was! Rev. something Bradley."

"Samuel," again I put in.

"Rev. Samuel Bradley—the very name! I see, sir, I have brought you no news," he said sternly.

"On the contrary," I replied, "you have supplied me with the most astonishing piece of intelligence that I have ever heard in my life."

"Perhaps," he asked, with a sneer, "since you know so much, you may be able to inform me of the name of Mr. Biddulph's son, since I suppose he went by his father's first name?"

"He did," I said, looking straight into my visitor's face, "His name is Mervyn Ray!"

The old man drew himself up as if the information were too great to grasp except at its full height. Profound silence reigned for a minute.

"Then I shall wish you good-morning, Mr. Ray," he said with military dignity, and, according me a stately bow, he left the room.

I buried my face in both my hands in a whirl of conflicting thoughts. I may have sat so for five minutes or an hour without my impressions crystallising themselves into actual thought, when I was interrupted by the light tap on my door which I had been so eagerly awaiting before the arrival of my military visitor.

She did not wait for me to reply, but burst into the room radiant, triumphant, regal.

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"Oh, it's splendid!" she cried, running forward impulsively to take my hand, "everyone says you have handled it in masterly fashion, and you can't think what a sensation it has made. Why, I have had three proposals this morning already," she laughed, shaking the envelopes at me, "and I think my solicitor had better reply to them.

"You are dreadfully official this morning," she said, retaining her hold of the letters she was handing me, and looking up at me with a bewitching appeal, "and I thought I should never get here, I wanted someone to share my joy with so badly."

I took papers, little hand and all, into my clasp, and with ever such a slight pressure I said gently—

"Miss Leslie could not come to anyone who would sympathise more in all her joys and sorrows."

She laughed, blushed a little, and busied herself with the pile of newspapers she had brought with her.

"Miss Leslie," I began, assuming again my most legal air, "we have, it is true, won our case, but in law it is necessary to be prepared for every sort of contingency arising, so that we may be ahead of our adversaries should such appear."

"Yes," she said, with mock severity, "now you look as you did yesterday in court. One paper said you were so handsome, and I am inclined to agree with Mrs. Clare, that you have some good looks," she laughed. "I am really very pleased. It adds so to the picturesqueness of our case."

I laughed too. How could one be serious with such a child?

"Miss Leslie, will you try to give me your attention for a few minutes?"

"Certainly, when you cease to be legal in your aspect. It is aggravatingly becoming."

I went over to the window. It was impossible to say what I had to with those dancing eyes upon my face. Fixing my gaze on an unresponsive lamp post outside, I pointed out that she, having inherited as heir-at-law, must inform me how she wished to act in case another claimant on the same grounds should come forward.

She was grave enough now.

"Oh, it is impossible," she cried. "My uncle never married, and I am the only child of his only sister, and he had no brothers!"

"Shall we say 'improbable?' In law we find so many things possible that certainly ought not to be so. I only asked in case of such a contingency arising, how would you wish me to act? We will suppose, for the sake of argument, that your uncle had married and left an heir, but, for some reason of his own, had kept the matter secret. If this child should now come forward to claim the inheritance, our wisest course would be to deny the legality of the marriage, which is often hard to prove when witnesses have died. If such an offspring existed, he would, no doubt, be poor, and so would be willing to resign his claim to the estate for a consideration rather than enter upon a lengthy and costly law suit."

She sat with her eyes bent upon the ground, while I spoke, but she now got up and faced me across my office desk.

"Do you think," she asked, her eyes big with a sad wonderment, "that I would keep for one moment what was not mine by right, if once convinced that such was not the case?"

It was well for us both, perhaps, that my desk was between us. She sat down again, her child's face getting old with the possibility of want, and her blue eyes filling with tears.

"Oh, what should I do?" she cried, "I am no use for anything, I would starve."

My face must have betrayed my feelings, for she added, with an attempt at her former gaiety—

"I should ask you to take me on as a typist."

"Would you not let me provide for you as my wife?" I said, leaning tenderly over her.

"How could I give you such a promise if I were penniless, when I don't want to marry at all while I am rich?"

"I will be content with the conditional consent, and, at the same time do all in my power to try to prevent the contingency arising."

"It would be nice to be loved just for one's own self," she said, looking up at me. "I will promise just—just to please you," and I bent over her and sealed the contract by a kiss on her sweet lips.

Then she left me with a nod and a smile, but there was a soft expression in her beautiful eyes that gave me a dream of happiness.

I had no time to enjoy my meditation, however, and I sent my office-boy flying for a cab before Miss Leslie's carriage had well left the street. I must bind Colonel Wyatt to silence regarding the revelations of the morning.

I drove to his club, but he had not yet returned. I left a note for him asking him to telephone to my office as soon as he did, and that I should come round, as I wished to see him most urgently. I then returned and sent for lunch.

The telephone bell rang in the outer office.

"Miss Leslie would be glad if you could call to see her as soon as possible," my clerk announced when the message at last came through.

I stood for a moment with a sudden doubt rising in my mind, and as quickly dispelled. She could not have heard. My toilet required a few minutes extra now, and then I was off, without a second thought of the Colonel, or the message I had been waiting for.

Miss Leslie had taken a dainty flat in London, where she had resided during the pending of the proceedings, with an old governess as companion.

As I entered the drawing-room she was standing at the window, looking out into the garden.

Her figure looked exquisitely girlish in a long, clinging black robe, but there was something pathetic in the attitude that did not suggest the elation of the morning.

"Mr. Ray," she said, coming towards me with a grave little smile, "I asked you to come round because I want you to do something for me."

"You know I could not have a greater pleasure in life," I said gently.

She did not reply for a minute, while she nervously twisted her gold chain into a knot and undid it again.

"This morning I made you a promise under very foolish circumstances. Terrified by the mere thought of possible want I consented to marry you if I lost my wealth. It was a very mean proceeding, and I want you to release me."

"Don't you think it will be time enough to think about it when the contingency arises?" I asked.

"No, please," she intreated, "I want to be free now."

"Would it add yet another terror to poverty to think you would have to share it with me?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she cried, "it is not that——"

"Then, my darling," I said, gathering her into my arms, "I am very sorry, but I cannot release you!"

She burst into tears and hid her face on my shoulder.

"Oh, Mervyn, you must!" she sobbed. "You knew this morning that you were the heir, and not I, and—and oh, you had no right to make me promise!"

"So Colonel Wyatt has been to see you, has he? Interfering old fool! Why can't he mind his own business, I'd like to know?" I cried angrily.

"He is not, he's a dear old man!" she said hotly. "He suspected you of treachery, and so he came to me, as was proper," and she smiled through her tears with just a touch of her old imperiousness.

It was very late in the afternoon when I called on Colonel Wyatt, and was not surprised to find he was somewhat testy at having been kept waiting for me all the afternoon. But he was really a kind old chap, and when he heard that Mildred and I had agreed to settle the heirship by becoming one, he forgot his own annoyance and consented to come to our wedding.

I am still looked upon as the lucky fellow who married Mr. Biddulph's beautiful heiress, as I insisted upon our cousinship remaining a secret. I considered that the *rôle* of the great lady suited her too well for me to pass it to her second hand, and as she queens it with consummate grace in all the small things of life, so she submits to my will in the larger issues, as she did by becoming my wife.

Peers Hervey.

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As Fate Would Have It.

The Romance of an Autumn Day.

PART THE FIRST: Morning.

FATE IS APPEALED TO.

"FLO, Flo! Now, you'll just have to let me tell her, dear, she will be so interested—Flo, such fun! Are you asleep; can we come in? It's only Hilda and I.!"

The eager questioner put a pink ear, almost covered by her loose and rippling chestnut tresses, to a panel of the closed entrance by which she stood, and listened impatiently, holding meanwhile aloft out of her companion's reach some sheets of note-paper, written upon and creased. The ruffled silken sleeve of her dainty dressing-jacket had slipped to the rounded shoulder of a white arm, at which a pair of girlish hands were catching desperately in the hope of drawing down the inaccessible documents.

From an open door across the passage a flood of electric light fell upon the two women—one a ruddy blonde, one that brown-haired, grey-eyed type which is between the blonde and the brunette. The latter was still fully dressed, her dinner-gown simple, almost severe, her only ornament the string of pearls about her slender neck.

"Please—please, Miss Beresford!" begged the younger, in a whisper. "I didn't want anybody but you to know, and—and Lady Florence is—is so——"

Hilda Vane's protest was left uncompleted—the entrance near which it had been uttered had yawned suddenly, and on the threshold there appeared a supple, golden-locked figure, a queenly vision in lace and cambric. Lady Florence Coppinger—as many a masculine compliment had reminded her—was a true "daughter of the gods," being, indeed, "divinely tall and most divinely fair." But the violet pupils under her finely-pencilled brows had in them habitually more than a trifle of haughty discontent, and her scarlet lips were superciliously thin and scornful. Something in her expression seemed to supply a key to the missing portion of Hilda Vane's interrupted sentence.

"My dear Pattie," she said, regarding the elder of her visitors with a cynical tolerance, "what is your latest freak? They usually afflict you in the small hours, I believe, and this is no exception to the rule. Are you aware that it is nearly three o'clock in the morning? If I had not had to write some letters for the morning collection I should have been in the arms of Morpheus long ago!"

Pattie Beresford slipped past the speaker into a handsome boudoir, gained the neighbourhood of a glowing fire, sank into a cushioned lounge beside it, and flourished the sheets of note-paper that she carried.

"Say, Flo!" she exclaimed, and both the phrase and her accent betrayed her to be an American, "talking about letters, what do you think?—Our little Hilda has actually received two offers of marriage, both in writing, and both by post! Here are the letters, they turned up this evening, Hilda says. After worrying over them for hours the poor child consulted me, and I really had to share the joke with you. Fancy, two formal offers, and some poor creatures can't even get one!"

Florence Coppinger re-closed the door of the room—the action served to disguise a sneer—before glancing at the person referred to by the voluble Pattie. Hilda, abashed by Miss Pattie's headlong frankness, and, on the whole, inclined to be indignant, was fingering the pearls at her throat, and gazing listlessly from a window of the boudoir. Without was the clear, cold, October dark, silvered by a waning moon.

"My congratulations, dear!" remarked Lady Florence, patronisingly, "And may—may I ask by whom these flattering propositions have been made?"

"That's just the amazing part of it," put in Miss Beresford, with a ripple of shrill, yet genuine laughter, "what do you say, for a beginning, to the Honourable Augustine Chesney, and ten thousand a year? Augustine, the precise and bilious, who, with half the matrimonial prizes of the county dancing after him, plumps for a pretty face and a sweet temper instead of a dowry!"

A sigh escaped from Florence Coppinger—a sigh that might have been one of relief. Then she knitted her brows.

"Not bad," she replied, absently, "not at all bad, Hilda. You would be Lady Chesney some day, if he were to outlive his uncle, the Viscount. But the other—what about the other?"

Pattie Beresford stole a glimpse at the querist's countenance.

"Mr. Quaritch," she answered briefly.

Lady Florence started.

"Ah!" was the cold retort. "I almost fancied he had been taking a sentimental interest in Hilda, but then it might only have been a paternal one. However, he can't be more than forty, I suppose, and though his practice at the Bar is a mere fiction, he has quite eight hundred a year after his mother's settlement."

"And is no end of a good fellow," added Pattie. "While Chesney is a confirmed invalid and as irritable as a caged bear. Still, he has ten thousand per annum, and Hilda says she isn't certain she cares for either of them. In that case, how is she to decide? I should get chance—that is, Fate—to decide it, and so I have told her!"

Hilda stole to the back of the lounge where her vivacious adviser was sitting.

"And I said, dear Miss Beresford," she observed gently, "that I believed I ought to refuse them both!"

Pattie Beresford stared at her aghast.

"My dear soul!" cried the young American, "and what would your blessed auntie say when she learnt that you had rejected not one, but two offers of marriage from men who are neither of them penniless. Doesn't she go about as it is telling every matron of her acquaintance how badly your dad's estate panned out, and how much your education and maintenance have left her out of pocket? No, you must take either Chesney or Quaritch, that's flat. You wouldn't have the life of a dog with her after refusing them both."

"How absurd you are, Pattie," said Florence Coppinger sharply, "Hilda mustn't dream of rejecting Chesney, any other girl would think it a marvellous piece of luck that he had happened to take a fancy to her. Ten thousand a year

and the possibility of a coronet! Heavens, what more can she want!"

"H'm!" rejoined Miss Beresford. "Well, I'm not as positive as you are about it. Remember, she'd have to live with Chesney and the income and the coronet might be dear at the price. Still, though Quaritch is nice, eight hundred, especially in this set, is genteel poverty for a married couple. If only Quaritch would wake up and do something! He's clever enough. Oh, the problem's too much for me—we'll have to get Fate to decide."

Hilda Vane had been oblivious to the last few phrases of the discussion, she had wandered into a profound reverie. The words of her downright American acquaintance were but too correct. Her life would not, in very truth, be worth living if the mean and not over-wealthy relative by whom, after her parents' death, she had been reluctantly reared, were to discover that a couple of eligible suitors had been dismissed by her charge.

At present the existence of Hilda Vane was that of an unwelcome hanger-on upon a penurious household. Clothes, boots, millinery, gloves, pocket-money, railway fares, all were grudged her. In the great country house where she was now staying with her aunt, she had but a single real friend, the rich little American, Pattie Beresford, whose pronounced fancy for her, everybody, and especially Lady Florence Coppinger—herself a privileged and exclusive member of the house-party—regarded with a kind of bored amusement. But Pattie was to marry Lady Florence's eldest brother, and re-establish the fortunes of a famous English title, and so her protegée was favoured by a sort of chilly intimacy with the blue-blooded, golden-locked beauty.

A medley of troubled thoughts were chasing one another through Hilda's aching head as she leant on the high back of the settee near the shrewd yet flighty Pattie. Reviewing swiftly her bitter girlhood, she realised that any opportunity of escape from a no less bitter future was a thing to be coveted. Yet, involuntarily, she found herself contrasting Robert Quaritch, the reserved, chivalrous barrister, whose passion for rare folios had kept him poor, as his grave kindliness and quiet sagacity had made him popular, with Augustine Chesney, the wealthy, ailing, irritable aristocrat, who had been struck by her gentle ways and unfailing tact. She had seen both men but seldom—occasionally in town, more frequently out of it. They had written to her now from neighbouring country-houses, where she had re-encountered them a day or two earlier.

Yet, though Robert Quaritch had always seemed to seek, and to enjoy her society, it was his offer that had surprised her most. There had, indeed, been moments when she had heard coupled, in the idle gossip of Society, the names of Lady Florence Coppinger and Robert Quaritch.

Pattie Beresford's voice aroused her from her reflections.

"I must read you their letters, Flo," the young American was saying, "and then I will tell you my scheme for consulting Fate. The letters are short, and the scheme is simple. So here goes."

Hilda put out a protesting hand, but Pattie evaded her merrily.

"First, the Honourable Augustine," she pursued, opening out one of the letters she held.

"'Dear Miss Vane,'" she read, "'I think you will appreciate the feeling of embarrassment which compels me to make a somewhat momentous communication to you in this, instead of the more usual form. Knowing the delicacy of my constitution as you do, you will, I am sure, see that it is best for me to avoid the excitement of a verbal discussion. My object in writing is to confess that the feelings of regard and admiration which I have long entertained for you, have become too warm for me to mistake their nature. Before consulting your esteemed aunt on the subject, I should be grateful for some hint of your own attitude towards me. With my sensitive disposition I should suffer too shockingly under anything like a formal rebuff. I must, however, assure you that my heart and my fortune are unreservedly at the disposal of the most charming of her sex. Devotedly yours,

"'Augustine Chesney.'"

"Isn't he prim?" exclaimed Pattie, delightedly. "And now for Mr. Quaritch!"

"Please, Miss Beresford!" pleaded Hilda, more pathetically than ever. But Pattie shook her chestnut tresses and laughed.

"Nonsense, poppet!" she said. "It isn't as if you loved either of them." And she began forthwith upon the second letter.

"'My Dear Little Hilda,—(For so I always think of you, and so I must call you at least once in my life), I am afraid you will be very much surprised when you get this letter, and realise that its object is to ask you to be the writer's wife. What excuse has Robert Quaritch for his presumption—what has he to offer a young and lovely woman in exchange for herself? Nothing that he dare speak of to her face, and so he needs must write. A heartache that your eyes have given me, that is my excuse, a trifle more of friendship and tenderness, even of comfort, than you are permitted to enjoy at present, these exhaust my humble offerings.

"'Consider me carefully, dear child, and ask yourself if I could not make you just a little trifle happier. I am grey, thirty-seven, and I can only promise my wife a moderate competence. But I should be so grateful always for the priceless boon of a little love from your loyal, innocent heart, that I think I should make you a good husband. I fear you are very lonely always, and you have given me a selfish heartache, so I write this, yet almost against my better judgment. But you will decide wisely, remembering that even if you cannot let me be your lover, I shall always be your affectionate friend,

'Robert Quaritch.'"

"Say, Flo, little Hilda has received two offers of marriage this evening. Here are the letters!

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Florence Coppinger's lips set and her nostrils contracted as she listened, and a red spot glowed hotly on either of her pale cheeks.

"I guess that's real sweet," ejaculated Pattie warmly; "but, of course, he's nearly forty, and a bookworm at that, and they do say his income dies with him, too, while Chesney's widow would be a wealthy woman and perhaps a peeress dowager. If only the Honourable Augustine wasn't such an owl!"

She allowed Hilda to repossess herself of the letters and clasped her own jewelled hands about her knees.

"We must leave it to Fate," she observed, "the poor old nice one or the rich young niminy-piminy one. Hilda must write to both of them accepting, and then we will burn one letter and post the other, without looking at the envelopes and wait to see whom Fate has chosen. Won't it be exciting! Give us pen and ink, Flo."

Florence Coppinger hesitated, then smiled strangely, and brought from an escritoire the writing materials she had herself been using. The youthful American set them before her *protégée*.

"The same wording will do for both," she intimated, "and I understand just the sort of shy, girly thing that you ought to put, Hilda—it would take you a day to hammer out a reply.

"Begin 'Dear Mr. Quaritch or Chesney'—you can make a copy for the other fellow. Now, 'I wish I knew what to say in answer to your very, very kind letter. Perhaps I must confess that it made me feel very happy—happy enough to sit down and cry.'

"That's more or less true, Hilda," she interpolated, "you had been shedding tears over them when you came to me, you tender-hearted creature. Go on! 'Of course I don't deserve the great honour you have done me, but I can't be selfish enough to think about that, though I am sure I oughtn't for your sake to say: Yes.'"

"Always flatter the brutes!" commented Pattie shrewdly. "And now sign it just 'Hilda,' and add: 'P.S.—I shall be in the conservatory here—near the side entrance—about four o'clock to-day. As you see, I am writing this in the small hours.'

"That will do very nicely," she concluded, "now make a copy for the other one, and put them in envelopes and address, and stamp them. Then we will let Fate choose, and at tea-time to-morrow you—and we—will know whom she has chosen. Afterwards you can write a nice refusal to the unlucky one."

Hilda looked from the little American to Lady Florence; her expression had become thoughtful, even amused.

"I don't see that you can do better," said the latter, with a shrug of her shoulders, "if you choose for yourself you are sure to regret it, one way or another. It will be a comfort to be able to blame somebody, if it is only Fate."

Pattie was setting a chair to an escritoire near the fire. A grave young figure in her dark dinner-gown, Hilda sat down and took up a pen. The others threw themselves into the adjacent lounge and chatted while she worked.

Twenty minutes later a sealed, stamped, and addressed envelope was dropped by Miss Pattie Beresford into the post-box in the dusky hall below. Another envelope at the moment was just flickering into ashes among the embers of Lady Florence's boudoir fire. The appeal to Fate had been made.

Part the Second: Afternoon.

Fate is Challenged.

"Don't lean so far out, Pattie, you—you will be seen."

"Rubbish, Flo," was the retort; "do you suppose the lucky one will have eyes for anything but his lady-love? Great Scott!"

Pattie Beresford's ejaculation was more suggestive of excitement than alarm. Yet she drew herself quickly into the curtained alcove from whose shelter she had been peering. In its deeper recesses Florence Coppinger was standing, statuesque and cynical in a classical tea-gown.

"Flo," whispered her companion, "I believe I'm glad—it's—it's Quaritch."

Florence Coppinger paled, but her expression became a strange mingling of amazement and incredulity.

"'Quaritch!" she repeated; "impossible."

Pattie stared. "Not at all," she responded; "it was an even chance. I don't expect, in her heart, that Hilda will be sorry."

She peered round the curtain again, and Florence Coppinger imitated her. From the recess they could see down the staircase and across the wide hall to the glass doors of a species of conservatory. A vigorous, square-shouldered, masculine form in riding-costume was just entering them. Florence started and drew back with a suppressed cry. Pattie glanced at her keenly, and noticed that on her regular white teeth was a tiny smear of crimson. She had bitten her lip till the blood came.

Ignorant alike of his feminine spies and their singular scrap of conversation, the subject of their scrutiny had stridden into the softly-lighted interior of the huge temperate palm-house which was one of the glories of the great country place.

"Hilda!" was all he said, and he held out his hand to a girlish figure that had risen from an antique marble seat. Hilda Vane looked at him doubtfully, but her fingers stole towards his, and were folded in a strong grasp.

Robert Quaritch was dark-haired and blue-eyed, with a firm, well-moulded chin, and fine, sensitive nostrils. The grey of which he had written was but a sprinkling on his temples, and his face was lined only by a grave good-humour. As Hilda gazed at him, she felt herself thrilled with a novel emotion. He had stooped and kissed her hand.

"My darling," he said and his voice was husky and broken. "I—I scarcely dared to hope that you could even give me a chance to teach you to care for me and yet, all the time, you loved me."

He drew her into his arms and Hilda yielded herself, not unhappily, to his embrace. Her head dropped on his shoulder, and she felt his moustache touch her cheek.

"How blind I was!" he murmured. "Hilda, my Hilda, let me hear you say that you love me."

The brown head on his shoulder raised itself and Hilda Vane saw that most wonderful of all sights to a woman's eyes, the lovelight in a strong man's face. Something seemed to burn in her own heart and the tears sprang to her lashes.

"Oh, I do," she sobbed. "I didn't know it, really, but I do."

Robert Quaritch bent and kissed her on the lips. "Thank Heaven," he murmured, "that I did not tear up my letter at the last. I—I nearly did."

He led her back to the seat from which she had risen, and they sat down together. The intoxication of deep joy had seized upon Robert Quaritch, and he talked excitedly, almost boyishly. His years of bookworm bachelorhood had left him, in reality, a young and ardent man, though his habitual reserve and affectation of middle age had earned for him socially the reputation of an old fogey.

Hilda listened to him with growing comprehension as he told her of his plans for the future—their future!—of his determination to earn her a fortune by the exercise of his profession, of the little flat in town and the tiny place in the country he had already projected for her. A feeling of alarm took possession of Hilda Vane. Surely such wonderful happiness could not be for her—she must be dreaming—

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a dream from which she will wake with a start to find her life as lonely and sunless as before.

Suddenly a clock in the neighbouring hall sounded the hour. The silver strokes penetrated faintly to them and Robert Quaritch, glancing at his watch, sprang to his feet.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, "six—and I dine here to-night. I must get back and change. Fortunately, no one saw me come in, so I shall take the liberty of omitting a visit to the drawing-room."

He held her hands in his for a moment and looked at her with glowing, tender eyes.

"I can scarcely believe it, even yet," he said; "when I get outside into the darkness and turn my horse's head away from this precious corner of the earth I believe I shall feel my old, grey, sober self again. But I daresay I shall get used to my happiness in time. For an hour or so, good-bye."

Once more Hilda's hands, her forehead, her mouth, felt the thrilling, unfamiliar contact of a crisp moustache and burning lips, and then the doors of the palm-house closed between her and her newly-found and passionate lover.

Robert Quaritch hurried down the corridor his pulses beating, his head in the clouds.

"I am a fool," he observed, half aloud; "one would think me a raw lad. And yet, I am a lucky fool—the luckiest fool in all broad England."

A step at his side and the rustle of feminine skirts arrested him. He halted, turned, and saw Florence Coppinger.

"Ah! Lady Florence," he said, bowing, "you find me trying to slip out in a hurry. I paid a passing call and recollected abruptly that I am to dine here to-night, and that I must rush home to dress."

Florence Coppinger smiled. In the subdued light of the corridor Robert Quaritch noticed, despite his abstraction, the bitterness of the smile.

"Hilda, Hilda, why did you tell me you loved me?"

"I know all about your call," she informed him; "Mr. Quaritch, we have been friends for years. Let me confess to you my share in a foolish freak, designed, if the truth must be told, by that wild little American *fiancée* of my brother's, and of which I am now heartily ashamed. You received this morning a letter from Miss Vane, accepting a certain proposal with which you had honoured her."

"Y-yes," stammered Robert Quaritch. Lady Florence drew a sharp breath and continued determinedly:

"A similar letter," she pursued, encountering his glance significantly, "was written to Augustine Chesney, who had also proposed to Hilda—to Miss Vane in writing. The letter to him and that to you were sealed and stamped. One was taken at random and burnt, one posted. Till you entered the palm-house just now, Miss Vane did not know which of her two suitors Fate had chosen for her. She owned that she loved neither of you, and Pattie Beresford easily persuaded her to submit the matter to the arbitrament of chance. But I could not let your life be spoilt by it all. Forgive me my part in the folly, and be warned against an engagement to a woman, nay, a child, who is absolutely indifferent to you."

A groan burst from Robert Quaritch, and he would have spoken. But Florence Coppinger had turned abruptly and vanished up a steep and winding staircase.

He took a step in the direction of the palm-house entrance as if to return to Hilda herself. Then he stopped and, passing a hand over his forehead, hurried on down the corridor, crossed the hall, and gained the open air. A groom was holding his horse—he mounted and rode off mechanically.

His own prophecy had been fulfilled — once more he felt himself old and grey. His new-found youth had passed out of his heart and mind like the evaporating fumes of some powerful wine. And in its place were shame and wretchedness.

Part Three: Evening.

Fate Is Made Manifest.

"I CONGRATULATE you, dear, I do, indeed. He is ever so much nicer than the Honourable Augustine, and you can always feel that it wasn't you who rejected ten thousand a year, it was Fate, consulted by my specially-patented method. If only the two poor creatures knew!"

And Miss Pattie Beresford chuckled behind her fan as she sat in the arched doorway that led from the palm-house to her hostess' splendid drawing-room. Near her Hilda Vane was moving restlessly to and fro, hardly heeding her companion's chatter, but glancing from time to time across the brightly-lighted apartment beyond.

"You should have seen Flo's face though," went on Miss Beresford, "when she saw who had come to acknowledge the receipt of the all-important letter. I believe she muttered something about 'impossible'—they say she has been sweet on Quaritch herself for ages. She didn't want me to marry into the great Coppinger family, the stuck-up thing! And so I've owed her one a long time—that's why I wanted her to know he'd proposed to you."

Miss Pattie interrupted herself. "Gracious!" she cried, "here he comes—two's company and three's none. I'll be off. If he makes love as nicely as he writes it, you won't want me hanging about."

She swept her rustling skirts down the aisle between the palms as Robert Quaritch came into the space under the glass dome, and paused by the little figure in the dark dinner-gown. He was very pale, and there were dusky hollows under his eyes. Without a word he offered her his arm, and they moved on through the palm-house together. The change in his demeanour had alarmed Hilda at dinner; his silence now disturbed her still more.

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"I'm afraid you—you are not well," she stammered at last. Robert Quaritch sighed heavily.

"I have been stricken to the heart," he said. "Hilda, Hilda, why did you tell me you loved me? I—I believed you, and all the while it was a mere chance and not your love that had given you to me."

Hilda Vane's hand loosed itself slowly from his arm, to be pressed to her side. She was trembling, and her face had grown almost bloodless. Robert Quaritch had not vouchsafed her the slightest warning of the thunder-bolt he had chosen to hurl at her. She could not even wonder who had played the traitor. Her mind was a pathetic blank. She sank down upon the very marble seat where they had talked a few hours earlier.

"It—it was very foolish," she faltered, "unwomanly—contemptible. But I hadn't time to think when it was first suggested to me, and then——" She broke off, unable to continue.

Robert Quaritch gazed at her, not unkindly. "I would have taken you on any terms, Hil—Miss Vane," he said. "I would have tried to win your love, to deserve it. It seemed incredible that, as it was, you actually loved me. If you had only not chosen between—between Chesney and me as though by the spin of a coin! I could have borne to lose you, but to think badly of you, to feel myself shamed in your shame and humiliation, that I cannot bear. If—if, above all, you had not said you loved me."

Hilda put her brown head on one slender arm and leant it upon the antique marble at her back. The sound of a sob reached Robert Quaritch's ear, and he stooped over her impulsively, all his native chivalry touched by her grief.

"Forgive me," he said, "perhaps I judged a girlish caprice too harshly—let us think no more of it. We can—we can be friends; you would not, of course—that is—I could not—"

An icy clutch seemed to be laid on Hilda's heart—love, happiness, all the opening beauty of the future were snatched from her by those broken phrases. They meant that she could not ever try to be the wife of Robert Quaritch.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she gasped. "You—you're wrong, quite wrong. But I couldn't explain—I—I've no proof. Please go away; I am a miserable girl!"

Robert Quaritch moved a pace or two away and then returned. "Tell me," he said, "what you mean by 'proof.' I love you still. Heaven help me! If there is any explanation possible, you owe it to me. Why, for instance, do I find on returning to home late this afternoon, a duplicate of the letter which I received from you at mid-day?"

A thrill shook the little figure on the marble seat, and Hilda sat up, her eyes wide and wet. Robert Quaritch held out to her a sheet of note-paper, covered with her own handwriting. Hilda snatched at it.

"It—it wasn't burnt?" she cried. "You will believe me then. See, see, both the letters I wrote were to you. The envelope to Mr. Chesney was empty, and I substituted for it this duplicate, addressed to you, after Lady Flo and Miss Beresford had looked at the original envelopes. So whichever one was burnt, the other was for you. They only thought it—it was Fate."

Robert Quaritch stared at her for a moment, then took her in his arms and folded her there. He was laughing, but there were tears in his eyes.

"My poor, ingenious darling," he murmured, "and so you really wanted me after all." And Hilda sobbed out something that could not have been "No," for Robert Quaritch kissed and kissed again the lips that had uttered it.

"But if one of your letters was—that is if one ought to have been burnt," Hilda was asked at length, "where did this momentous duplicate come from?"

Hilda looked at the document and shivered, almost superstitiously. "It's—it's very strange," she said, "it must be Fate, after all. But it *is* my letter, there is the C turned into a Q—I was writing 'Dear Mr. Chesney,' when the idea came to me. Before that I didn't mean to go on with the nonsense, really. And there's a blot I made and was in two minds to write the letter over again, only there wasn't time."

Hilda leant towards him tremulously. "Won't you tell me," she begged, "how you got to know about—about——"

Robert Quaritch folded up the mysteriously-preserved duplicate, and pocketed it.

"Some day you shall know," he replied; "doubtless we are the victims of some foolish trick—a trick that Fate has turned to our advantage, since, had this duplicate been destroyed, you would not have risked my believing the truth. And yet, I almost think I would have accepted your word for it."

Robert Quaritch was right. Fate had taken a part in the game. But not for some months did they learn in what way the part had been played, and then it was the amused and inquisitive Pattie who fathomed the mystery.

Lady Florence, it seemed, had had her own reasons for assenting to the proposed appeal to Fate, and during the shuffling of the addressed envelopes—a task deputed to her by the ironical Pattie—had substituted for a letter addressed to Robert Quaritch, one of the sealed and stamped envelopes forming part of her completed correspondence. This letter she had, for its easy identification, turned up at one corner and contrived to have it condemned to the flames. The other, she made sure, was addressed to Augustine Chesney. In point of fact it also was directed to Robert Quaritch.

As for the means by which the abstracted envelope and its inclosure had reached Quaritch in time to soften his indignation with a little masculine curiosity, they were simple enough. Lady Flo had left the stolen envelope among her letters on the escritoire, and early the following morning, her maid had posted it with them.

So Hilda's secret manipulation of her own fortune found an unexpected corroboration, and Fate had, after all, to be thanked for a marriage whose romantic happiness has not ceased to be a marvel among the masculine acquaintances of Robert Quaritch and the feminine critics of his charming little wife.

R. Norman Silver.

SHE: "Cupid is not in it as a marksman, Goosey." He "Why not, Angel?" She: "He's always making Mrs."

"WHEN he saw the enemy coming he turned and ran. I call that cowardice." "Not at all. He remembered that the earth is round, and he intended to run round and attack the enemy from the rear."

SERGEANT, to new cavalry recruit: "Never approach the horses from behind without speaking. If you do they'll kick you on that thick head of yours, and the end of it will be we'll have nothing but lame horses in the squadron."

LANDLADY: "Poor Mr. Lightweight died last week and if anyone deserved to go to Heaven he did." Mr. Heavygaul (who is slightly in arrears): "Why?" Landlady (weeping): "He always paid his board in advance, never complained if his bed wasn't made up, and, oh, such a delicate appetite as that poor saint had!"

LITTLE EDITH had the habit of eating out the soft part of her bread, and tucking the crust under the edge of her plate. The other evening Edith was detected in this, and her mother said: "Edith, how often have I told you about leaving your crusts? There may be a day when you will be glad to get them." "Yes, mamma," replied Edith, "that's what I'm saving 'em for."

YOU know that cheeky fellow Smith. Have you heard his latest trick? He goes and consults a solicitor, and, having received advice, coolly places on the table a three-penny bit. "What is this for?" "Your fee, sir; hope it is right." "Excuse me, no; my fee is, of course, six-and-eightpence." "Well," says Smith, "all right. Six-and-eightpence are fourteen pence; fourteen pence are one-and-twopence: one and twopence are three pence, and there you are!" Solicitor rises in his chair. Exit Smith.

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The Disappearance of Captain Overend.

The Tale of an Ocean Tragedy.

"I *can't* sleep," growled Captain Overend, of the Silver Star liner *Illwarra*, as he rolled over for the fifth time. "She's making bad weather of it anyway, and Dickson won't be sorry to get relief."

He tumbled out and put on his things. It wanted another half hour before his watch was due, but in his present frame of mind it mattered little to him whether he took charge now or later on.

As he stood there in his state-room, Captain William John Overend was a supremely happy man. He had but just been appointed captain of the *Illwarra*, and this was his maiden voyage as her skipper. That was one reason for his happiness, but there was another almost as weighty. Among the saloon passengers was a certain Miss Nellie Burns, now on a voyage from Australia to the Old Country—his Nellie, Nellie whom he had loved since they were children together; Nellie who had been so proud of him when he first appeared in the brass buttons and jaunty cap of his apprentice days; Nellie whom he, out of his scanty earnings, had sent to a good school, for her parents were miserably poor. And now the dream was about to be realised. He had £250 in the bank, his pay had increased with a bound, and the one obstacle to their earlier marriage—want of means—was removed.

True, he could not see much of her on the journey, for the directors of the Silver Star Line were martinets of the sternest type, and did not hold with their officers carrying wives or sweethearts at all, let alone squiring them during the voyage. And so it came about that poor Overend and his *fiancée* had to be content with meaning glances and commonplace chats at long intervals, for there was a director of the company among the passengers, and it would never have done for the new commander to have given cause for offence on his maiden trip in his own ship.

Buttoning up his pilot jacket, the skipper left his cosy state-room, still full of fond thoughts of the future. The wind was rising momentarily, and he paused for a second to get his breath ere climbing to the dizzy altitude of the bridge.

Suddenly he became aware of a man and woman standing sheltered in an alleyway to leeward, deep in earnest conversation, and the strangeness of their presence there at such an hour made him curious. Presently the voice of the woman came to his ears, every word clear and distinct in the comparative shelter of the great funnel.

"It *can't* be," she said, pitifully. "Oh, it can't be! I am bound to him by every tie it is possible to think of. Ever since childhood we've been sweethearts, and till I met you I loved him dearly—and he's worked so hard to be able to marry me! He even paid for my schooling and bought my passage! Oh, I know I ought to love him, but I *don't*, not now! It's dead, as though it had never existed! Dick, darling, tell me——"

But Overend had heard enough, more than enough. Like a man in a dream he walked back to his room and shut himself in. He could not think; his brain was in a whirl, and presently he appeared on the bridge with a curt intimation to the first officer that he could go below and turn in.

"Old man seems queer to-night," was the first officer's mental comment, as he made for his quarters. "Thinking about his marriage, I suppose. And me best man, great Scott!"

* * *

Alone on the windswept bridge, with nothing but the heaving waste of black and troubled waters around him, Overend's thoughts grew gradually calmer.

His cherished ideal was shattered; his golden idol had feet of clay. The woman whose words had come to his ears with such cruel distinctness was Nellie—his affianced wife, his sweetheart since childhood, and the man with her was none other than Lieutenant Dick Hazely, of the Light Horse, nephew of one of his own directors, and one of the biggest blackguards in Sydney!

In one brief month on shipboard Nell had learnt to forget the long hard struggle Overend had made for her sake, the countless sacrifices, the patient waiting.

And now—now she had flung him over for the sake of a man who had come into her life but yesterday, and who she knew by repute to be a scoundrel! He gripped the wet rail savagely and looked out ahead, where the turmoil of the billows seemed to harmonise with his mood.

He realised now, dimly, that for him life had lost its savour; there was nothing left to live for. This woman had been all in all to him, and now the simple, trustful sailor's heart was broken.

He looked at his watch. In ten minutes the second officer would be on deck to relieve him. Then he walked up and down the bridge—once, twice—with agitated steps, thinking over the step he was about to take. Should he leave a letter for her? No, better to go to his death without a word. She had no doubt been tempted; she had fallen; and he could not find it in his heart to reproach her. "But as for him," he said aloud, though none but the moaning wind heard him, "may my curse be upon him!"

Then a mass of storm-scud obscured the moon, and when the quartermaster at the wheel glanced over the bridge it was vacant.

* * * * *

A week later *The Times* had the following paragraph:

The Silver Star liner Illwarra, *which arrived in London yesterday from Australia, reported the mysterious disappearance in mid-ocean of her commander, Captain William John Overend. He was last seen on the bridge about* 10 *p.m. last Monday night. This sad fatality was followed next morning, by the suicide of a saloon passenger, a Miss Nellie Burns, who deliberately jumped overboard, sinking before a boat could be launched. From inquiries made by our representative, we learn that Captain Overend and Miss Burns were engaged, and that their marriage was to have taken place at the conclusion of the voyage. No motive can be assigned for this double suicide, and the whole affair wears an aspect of mystery.*

But there is a man living in Sydney to-day—one Dick Hazely, a gambler and loose liver—who, even in the midst of headlong dissipation, can never banish the ugly memory of a certain shipboard intrigue which he carried too far.

Victor Pitt-Kethley.

AGATHA: "What are you standing there and gazing up at that window for?" Marie (agitated): "Willie has gone up to ask papa to consent to our engagement, and I want to stand under to break his fall."

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The Story of Esther.

Telling of a Woman's Sacrifice.

The wind rustled among the corn, and the poppies nodded coquettishly as the breeze swept over them. Overhead the sun shone in golden splendour, until the air seemed to quiver with the heat. Too hot for anything but to lounge idly in a hammock, or rest under the shade of green trees.

And yet, for the past half hour a young girl had been waiting in the full glare of the sun, on the roadside by the turnpike gates.

"You're sure the carriage hasn't passed?" she asked anxiously, scanning the long white road that wound like a ribbon, in and out the green hill sides.

"You'd do better to come in and rest," returned the woman. "Nothing has passed since twelve save the carrier's cart. Why not sit down a bit, Esther? You can watch the road as well from the window as the gate."

The girl sighed, and half unwillingly went towards the house. She was tall and well built, with a certain dignity of carriage out of keeping with the plain print gown and faded sun-bonnet.

"Is your sister worse to-day?" questioned the turnpike woman curiously.

Esther nodded, but made no attempt at further answer, and after a prolonged inquisitive stare, Mrs. Jordan gave up the attempt to "draw" her visitor, and set about her household duties.

The neighbourhood in general did not regard Esther Arnold and her sister Nerette with a marked degree of approbation. To commence with Nerette was a foreign, new-fangled sort of name for a Christian person; further, it was "stuck up," not to say presumptuous, on Esther's part to reject deliberately the advice of persons older and wiser than herself in regard to the management of the same Nerette.

Plenty of work, that is what *she* wants," the busy housewives would declare, pointing emphatically to the fair, slight girl, who never did anything more laborious than pick flowers, and occasionally arrange them.

But to all their protestations the elder sister turned a deaf ear. Nerette was all she had in the world, and if she could make her darling's lot ever so little easier, by her own hard work and self-denial, why it was her pleasure and her pride to do so. The two girls lived on a moorside farm, a lonely, deserted spot, where, so the wiseacres declared, nothing would grow but thistles. Despite the wiseacres, however, Esther managed to wrest a livelihood for herself and her sister out of a sandy soil, and what was more, contrived to lay up for a rainy day.

"Here's the carriage, Esther," called out Mrs. Jordan. "Look alive, my girl, the Castle horses don't like waiting."

The occupant of the carriage, a tall, square-shouldered man, with keen eyes and an incisive manner, glanced up impatiently from his book as Esther somewhat falteringly addressed him.

"What is it?" he asked sharply. "What do you want?"

She drew herself up, and her hesitation suddenly disappeared.

"I think," she said slowly, "you are Doctor Martin, are you not?"

"Yes," he returned, regarding the dark face, with its flashing teeth and deep set eyes with some attention.

"My sister is ill," she said. "I heard you were coming down from London to see Lady Lester at the Castle, and so I determined to wait here and speak to you. I want you to come and see my sister."

The physician leant back and regarded his questioner with interest. Not a village girl, nor yet the ordinary type of farmer's wife or daughter. Something out of the common, he decided, and the uncommon, having an attraction even for a fashionable medical man, somewhat affected his manner.

"Has not the local doctor seen your sister?" he questioned.

A shade of contempt lurked for an instant in her eyes.

"Yes," she said simply. "Doctor Barton has seen her—many times."

The physician smiled to himself. Evidently Doctor Barton did not stand very high in the rustic estimation—as personified by this girl at all events. He had not been much impressed himself by his village coadjutor, Barton being one of those eminently annoying persons, who, having no mind of their own, borrow that of the person to whom they may be talking.

"Will you come?" she said quietly.

She betrayed not the slightest sign of anxiety or eagerness, but stood quite still with none of the little gestures characteristic of your modern city women.

For a second he hesitated. It was important he should be back in town that afternoon. If he visited the sick girl it would delay him hours on his journey. He would miss the train; have an age to wait at a sleepy little sun-baked station; and arrive too late for an appointment that meant much to him. An appointment that he had taken infinite pains and trouble to bring about.

No, it was impossible to upset all his arrangements simply to see an ailing rustic. Viola Percival had so persistently ignored his attentions, so chilled his admiration, so skilfully evaded his most artfully-contrived *tête-à-tête*, that to throw away the opportunity she had at last vouchsafed him of seeing her that afternoon would be madness indeed. Viola lived with her aunt in an old-fashioned house in Fulham.

The doctor thought it dull for her, and hinted that Cavendish Square was considerably brighter. But she never responded in the least.

"My brother Laurie will settle down some time," she always said, "and then we shall live together somewhere nearer town. I shall keep house for him, and it will be altogether delightful."

But at present the prospect of Laurie's "settling" seemed very vague. He was a brilliant, extravagant, not to say rackety young man, of no profession, possessed of a small income and expensive tastes. He was not a favourite with the doctor—by reputation at all events—for the two men had met but once, and then only for a minute.

The physician sighed softly at the dainty picture his

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thoughts conjured up. Viola with her grey eyes and soft brown hair—Viola! He turned abruptly to Esther.

"I am afraid," he commenced.

The immobility of the woman vanished as he spoke. She leant over the carriage side, and brought her face close to his own. The sun-bonnet had slipped back, the doctor noticed that the hair fell in soft curls and clinging tendrils round her temples, and that it was a nutty brown with a touch of gold, as though a ray of sunshine were imprisoned there.

Under her dusky skin the warm blood flushed Esther's cheek, her eyes flashed, and her fingers, long and nervous, bit into her palms.

"You *must* come," she said. "I say you must!"

And against his will, by reason of the woman's strength of purpose, he consented.

"I can spare you half an hour," he said abruptly. "You had better get in and tell the coachman where to drive."

"Thank you," she said gravely in her former level tones. "You follow the road till you come to the mill, then turn off across the moor. The road is bad just there, I'm afraid you'll have to walk the rest of the way."

He felt aggrieved at the cool manner in which she received his consent.

"Doubtless we shall manage," he said stiffly. "Are you not coming?" opening the carriage door as he spoke.

Conventionality in the wilds of the country could not, in the doctor's estimation, count for much. Print gown and sun-bonnet notwithstanding, he felt somehow the girl would not be out of place in a carriage, and he was unaccountably chagrined when she refused.

"I shall be there sooner than you are," she said. "There's a short cut off the road." And with a bend of her head, she turned off, walking with the swift long strides that marked her out, no less than her height, from other women.

She received him half an hour later at the door of the moorside farm. Upstairs, in a sunny room overlooking the wide expanse of purple heather, a slight, fragile looking girl was waiting.

"This is my sister Nerette," said Esther quietly, and stood gravely regarding the two, doctor and patient.

A very slight examination convinced the doctor that there was little the matter with the girl beyond a latent delicacy of constitution. He glanced keenly at Esther. Was it possible that he had been mistaken in his estimate of her? Was she merely a nervous, excitable woman, ready to take fright at straws, and imagine that her sister's capricious appetite and loss of colour denoted serious illness? He was puzzled—and angry.

He bade his young patient "Good-bye," and followed Esther down the stairs with a look of determination about his mouth that augured ill for somebody.

The girl paused when they reached the hall, and stood, as if irresolute, outside the sitting-room.

Doctor Martin seized the opportunity. With a quick movement he threw the door wide open.

"I want to speak to you," he said, a trifle grimly.

With colour slightly heightened, and eyes that would not meet his own, she entered. He closed the door and followed.

"Miss Arnold," he said slowly, but with a certain intonation that stung—as he meant it should sting—"why did you bring me here, cause me to give up valuable time, and throw out my arrangements on a frivolous pretext?"

She did not meet the accusation with a quibble or evasion, but answered, her head thrown back, and her face set.

"You think it frivolous?"

"Undoubtedly. Moreover, you know it to be so. You are a woman of some intelligence, not likely to be deceived in ordinary matters, or every day occurrences. You do not need me nor anyone to tell you there is nothing much the matter with your sister. Why then trouble me to this extent? Unless," with a sudden lowering of the voice, "unless you had some other and more urgent need for my assistance?"

For a while there was silence. In the old-fashioned parlour, sweet with lavender, mignonette, and other scents of bygone times, the ticking of the clock sounded curiously loud. The doctor watched her face intently. Why had she brought him to this lonely place? What secret had this curiously self-contained woman in her life? What strange confession was he about to hear?

With a swift gesture she turned to him. "You are right," she said, "I was deceiving you. I brought you here, as you say, under false pretences. Excuse, I offer none; explanation, there is none to give you. But," and she laid her hand upon his arm, "deception is not always a cloak for evil. Sometimes circumstances are too strong for us, too strong even for men, how much more for women? I have brought you here in an hour of danger, distress. I ask you—having no claim, no right to ask it—for help!"

"Well?" he said. "Well?"

She paused and her breath came quickly. "There is a man here ill—dying. I want you to help me save his life. But you must promise secrecy, promise no one shall ever know, or hear, who or what you see."

An odd situation truly for a West-end physician—a lonely farmhouse, miles from any habitation, and a woman with a strange and dangerous secret for company!

Yet something in the woman appealed strongly to Paul Martin. Her strength, her courage, her daring drew him towards her.

"Will you promise?" she asked, and in the dimly-lighted room her face, glowing with life, held his eyes.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I will!"

She fell back a little and ran her fingers through the short, dark curls that fell over her forehead. It seemed a gesture of relief.

"Come," she said, and strangely stirred, he followed her into an adjoining room.

A man was lying half unconscious upon the bed. His head was bound up, and there had been some attempt at bandaging his shoulder.

He was young—about five-and-twenty—and when in health must have been good-looking in a boyish sort of way. The face reminded the doctor of somebody, but of whom he could not think.

"Is this man your brother, or related to you?" he asked sharply.

"No," she said; "no relative."

The doctor frowned and his manner grew a shade more distant.

"How long since he met with his—accident?" with ever so slight a sneer on the last word.

Esther shook her head. "I can tell you nothing—nothing," she said. "If you are going to help us you must deal with things as they are now."

"Draw up the blind," he told her sharply, "and fetch some brandy."

She obeyed, and stood watching the skilful fingers until he spoke again.

"The man has been shot," he said gravely, "in two places; the arm and the shoulder. He is in a critical condition!"

"Yes."

"His head is badly injured," he went on. "He seems to have struck it on something sharp."

She shivered, and her fingers twined round the rail of the bed.

"The wound is quite recent." Then, turning upon her. "How far is the nearest town from here?"

"Leeminster — some fourteen miles."

He looked at the face upon the pillow and surveyed it curiously.

"Too far to remove him, I'm afraid."

TWENTY SPLENDID GRAMOPHONES are offered for competition in this number.

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THE LOVE PROBLEM SERIES commences on Page 798.

"*Move him!*" said Esther hoarsely. "What do you mean?" Before the doctor could reply the sick man stirred, moaned a little and opened his eyes. And as he met their glance the doctor did, for him, a strange and unprofessional thing.

He showed surprise.

For as the man opened his eyes, there flashed into the doctor's mind the conviction that somewhere he had seen the face before. Time and place were a blank, but that it had been in very different surroundings from the present he was convinced.

"His name?" he asked sharply, laying his hand on Esther's arm.

But the sick man himself gave the answer.

"Jack Hazeldean—much at your service!" he cried in the high-pitched voice of delirium.

Doctor Martin of Cavendish Square, and of much reputation, felt himself turn pale. He had consented to do his best for the man's recovery, had pledged himself to secresy concerning the man's whereabouts, not knowing who he was.

Truly, the fashionable physician had done a nice thing for himself. Jack Hazeldean was the name of a notorious thief!

* * * * *

All the way up to town Paul Martin strove to discover the identity under which he had previously seen the wounded man at the farm. Jack Hazeldean, albeit all too well known to the proprietors of family jewels, not to mention the detective force in general, and one or two bright and shining lights of Scotland Yard in particular, had never yet been upon trial. Not for lack of evidence against him, but for lack of ability to take or keep him. Twice he had been arrested, sent on trial, twice he had escaped before the day of trial arrived. This being so the doctor could not—he reasoned—have been made familiar with his features from the pages of an illustrated paper. Where then, had he met the man?

As for the particular undertaking in which "Jack" had received his injuries, the evening papers cast a lurid light upon the subject. Lord Neswell's house had been broken into with the object of stealing the famous Neswell diamonds. Luckily the thief had been discovered, and the jewels saved. "Jack," however, had escaped, but not before one of the house party had fired at, and to the best of his belief, wounded him. From the description of the man the police believed it to be the work of Jack Hazeldean, but where that notorious person had hidden himself could not be discovered.

Doctor Martin groaned in spirit. *He* knew—and raged at his knowledge. Why the thief should have taken shelter at the farm was a more difficult problem. Paul Martin was not often wrong in his estimate of men and women, and Esther had struck him as being a particularly strong-willed, self-reliant young woman, not likely to be carried away in her judgment by good looks or a fluent tongue. How then had the wily Jack gained such an influence over her?

Unless—the doctor stirred uneasily and half repressed a sigh.

"A pity!" he said. "A pity! All women are fools, I suppose, where a lover is concerned."

Circumstances stood in the way of his seeing Viola Percival for the next week or two. The moorside farm and the sick man took hold of his imagination to the exclusion of other things. He would not admit that the dark-browed Esther entered into his thoughts somewhat considerably, but put his interest down to professional anxiety for his patient. He had received two or three notes from Esther—curt, business-like communications that amused yet piqued him. The patient was getting on rapidly, nearly well, in fact. No necessity evidently for him to run down again, and yet, for no good reason he could give, the doctor found himself one evening outside the farm.

Esther looked worn and thin, and her eyes did not meet his glance so fearlessly. He learnt the reason later. The neighbours, in the inscrutable manner known and practised among inhabitants of a country place, had found out that a stranger was staying at the farm. Evilmongers seized on the rumour, and tossed it one from the other, till Esther herself was shunned, and the farmhouse given a wide berth.

Something of this Paul gathered at the inn where he had put up for the night. And, moved by indignation and a host of strange and complex emotions, he wrote and asked, or rather, commanded Esther to come and see him in town.

"You're a young girl," he said, standing severely before her, "and don't know how the world talks, or the things it says. I have kept the pledge of secresy I gave you, but the time has now come when, failing other things, that pledge must be broken. The fellow is well enough to be moved by this time. Indeed, he ought to have left without being told. Now, understand me, either he is gone from your house by this day week, or I take such steps as will effectually remove him. I mean what I say, Esther."

Unconsciously he had used her name, but if she noticed it she made no sign.

"If you mean you will tell the police," she said, slowly, "they know already. He would have got away by this time only they watch the house night and day. There's only one chance to save him, only one." She paused and then turned to him with the eloquent gesture of appeal she used when greatly moved. "You must save him," she said—"*You!*"

Once more he felt the woman's fascination strong upon him. He leant and took her hands—well-formed and slender, for all that they were roughened with hard work.

"And *then*, Esther," he said hoarsely—"then——"

Her face flushed a dark, deep red, for a second she stood with lowered eyes, then, drawing her hands from his, she spoke—

"He——" she commenced.

The doctor interrupted with a sneering laugh.

"Don't trouble," he said bitterly. "I understand—he is your lover. That, I suppose, is why I am to save him."

Something seemed to choke her. She raised her hands to her throat, as though she were being suffocated.

"This fellow," he went on savagely, "This mean-spirited cur who seeks protection from two women, why am I to help him escape justice, why am I to shelter Jack Hazeldean, the thief?"

Esther, standing by the table, saw a woman pausing in the doorway. A tall, slight figure came quickly into the room, and turned to the doctor with a passionate appeal.

"You will save him because I ask you, I, the woman that you love!"

"Viola!" he cried. "Viola!"

"Oh, Paul, Paul," she said, "forgive him, help him, and take pity upon me. Jack Hazeldean is my only brother Laurie!"

* * * * *

It is an axiom that character, not circumstances, makes or mars a life. At times, however, the strongest personality is as wax in the grasp of circumstances. For three years it had been the strongest desire of Paul Martin's heart to gain the love of Viola Percival. And now, now that the fruit so long withheld was within his reach, aye, within touch of his hand, the joy of possession seemed to have lost its edge.

And yet he would not have had things otherwise. He loved Viola with the quiet strength of a deep-seated affection. The strange interest that Esther had roused in him was unworthy of his better nature—so, at least, he told himself. It was glamour, he decided, and felt scornful that he should feel attracted by a woman who had so little self-respect as to love a thief.

Strangely enough the fact that the aforesaid thief was Viola's brother never affected his attitude of mind towards her.

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He was only conscious of a great pity for Viola, and a resolution to shield her as far as possible from the consequences of her brother's evil-doing.

Laurie had written to Viola from the farm, intreating her aid and assistance. She had never had the slightest suspicion as to his mode of life, and the revelation had stunned her. She had gone instinctively to Paul, and arrived just in the middle of his interview with Esther.

Paul was glad in his heart that for some reason Viola never asked for an explanation of that interview. Esther had quietly slipped away, and Viola had been too much occupied to note she had gone. Later she did nothing but contrive impossible schemes for Laurie's escape, and racked her brain—and Paul's—to hit on some way to save him.

But, as Paul had foreseen, the way was made plain, not by himself or Viola, but through Esther.

"Have a trap with a fast horse waiting by the turnpike gate on the road to Leeminster Monday afternoon at five," she wrote. "Let the driver have two railway tickets from Leeminster to London in readiness, and arrange for two persons to be met at the terminus in town." Nothing more, not a word as to whom one, at least, of the two persons was to be. Paul smiled in a cynical fashion as he read, and his mind conjured up the boyish-looking figure of Hazeldean side by side with Esther, tall and dark, with her glowing face and deep-set eyes.

Well, so be it. In two days at most he would see the last of this dusky-browed woman. He could look forward to a future with Viola. Viola of the calm eyes and gentle smile.

He arrived at Leeminster on the day appointed about two o'clock, dispatched a trusty messenger with a horse and trap and the all-important tickets to the turnpike road, and then waited with what patience he could command for the arrival of Esther and her companion. He judged it wiser not to be seen in their company, and accordingly took up a position in the waiting-room of the station, where he commanded a view of the platform without being observed.

The up train was due at 5.30. At 5.15 he commenced to grow anxious. Could they have missed the trap, had the police been too many for them, was all his care and trouble to go for naught? He bit his lips and stared hungrily at the crowd of loiterers on the platform.

A long-drawn whistle in the distance proclaimed the approaching train. Nearer and nearer it came, and gradually slowed down. With brain on fire Paul Martin scanned the faces of the people. The hurry and fuss of belated passengers struck chill to his heart. So late, so late, and yet they had not come!

The guards began to shut the doors, the engine snorts in complaining fashion, preparatory to a final shriek. Paul turns sick with apprehension. Suddenly two figures come in sight, urging their way among protesting porters and insisting newsboys. Paul strains his eyes as they pass the waiting-room, and falls back with a start. A tall, broad-shouldered woman—he had been prepared for that, but the sight of her companion comes upon him with a shock.

He had expected Hazeldean, or rather Percival, with Esther. Instead, he saw Nerette, her sister.

A thousand fears and strange forebodings shot through his mind. It was so unlike Esther to have left Hazeldean to his fate, that at first he thought he had misread her letter. No, there it was—"have two tickets in readiness—arrange for two people to be met in town." Two people—herself and Nerette!

So much for woman's devotion! Instead of saving her lover, Esther had merely removed herself and sister from the scene of his arrest. Paul felt sick with revulsion of feeling against her.

But there might yet be time for him to save Viola's brother. With all possible speed he made his way to the Moorside Farm, hoping against hope that he might not be too late.

A moment's glance as he neared the house showed him the game was up.

A knot of men were grouped a little distance from the gate, farther up the road—somewhat conscious of their own importance—two village constables were waiting, while a fringe of idlers lounged within easy hail.

A short, stout man advanced to meet the doctor. Paul had seen him once or twice before, and knew him for the local inspector of police.

"It's a bad business, sir!" he said, with a nod in the direction of the farm house. "Reckon it's hard on Esther, but——" and he shook his head portentously. He was evidently primed with information, and bursting to impart it.

"You knew the man was here?" asked Paul.

The inspector nodded.

"For the last week," he said, "we have only been waiting for him to get well. One doesn't like to nab a man but half alive, so to speak. Besides"—he discreetly lowered his voice—"I had a bit of sympathy with Esther. It wasn't quite professional, I know, but I like the girl, and I'm sorry for her. So I promised her to wait till he was better. She and her sister went out of the way this afternoon, poor things, and now"—he paused and nodded towards the house.

"I don't want any violence if it can be done without," he went on loftily. "By-and-bye he'll sneak out—thinks the coast's clear, you know, and then we'll drop on him. If we went indoors like enough he'd show fight. One of my men might get shot, and there'd be trouble."

"How long shall you wait?" asked Paul, with dry lips.

"Not after eight, it grows darkish about then, so if he don't come out we'll have to go for him."

The doctor gazed round helplessly. It had gone seven already, there was but an hour remaining. An hour in which to get this hunted wretch away from his pursuers!

Bribery? One glance at the inspector showed him the futility of attempting such a thing. Fight? What could one man do against twenty? And there was only an hour in which to make a plan. The peaceful summer evening, the sky primrose-tinted, save where the heather cast its purple shadow on the horizon, maddened him. The far-off song of a wild bird sounded in his ears like a scream of agony.

Eight o'clock—by that time Esther and Nerette would have arrived in London. By that time——

The inspector drew out his watch, and waited with phlegmatic calm for the hands to point the hour.

At that moment Paul's quick eye saw the creepers at the side of the house farthest from where they stood vibrate. Something was clinging to the long, tough tendrils, swaying nearer and ever nearer to the ground. Paul caught his breath and waited.

The figure touched earth, crept softly to the hedge—crawled through, and——

A shout went up, the cruel, exultant shout men give when the thing they hunt comes within sight. In a minute inspector, policemen, idlers, were after the fugitive full cry. Along the moor, over the hillocks, fragrant with gorse, he fled, panting and straining for that which men fight for, die for—liberty!

The tall, lithe figure of the man was seen to be making in the direction of a wood some half mile distant. There the undergrowth was so thick, and the paths so many, that it was possible, could he once gain its sanctuary, he might escape.

The inspector saw the danger, and balanced the chances. He could not afford to let the man slip through his fingers; but, on the other hand, being a humane person first and a policeman after, he did not want to fire. Possibly distrust of his own powers as a marksman had something to do with it.

Be that as it may, the decision was suddenly taken from his hands. Among the group of idlers who had joined the chase was a young fellow who had

Do not Miss our New Serial, "THE ALBERT GATE MYSTERY."

shown even more anxiety for the capture of Hazeldean than the inspector himself. He was dressed in the regulation velveteen of a gamekeeper, and carried a gun. Whether, as he stated, excitement got the better of him, or whether, as some say, he owed the thief a grudge for love of Esther, none ever knew. But as the flying figure gained the entrance to the wood, he caught the musket to his shoulder and took aim. A report rang out upon the quiet air—a report and then a thud, and a scream startled the echoes far and wide—a scream like a shot plover gives among the wind-swept marshes.

A great dread of what he should behold under the shadow of the trees possessed Paul Martin. He ran with heavy dragging feet like a blind man along an unknown road. The others followed, hushed into silence.

The quarry was run to earth at last; the thing that they had hunted with such fierce delight, such savage zest, lay crushed at their feet.

"Laurie!" cried Paul, in a broken voice. "Laurie!"

But when he reached the figure, and saw the face in the fair light of the early moon, a cry of exceeding bitterness broke from his lips.

Not the thief, not the man on whose liberty a price was set, lay there before him, but Esther—dark-browed and beautiful Esther—the woman whom he loved!

She raised herself eagerly and clung to his arm.

"Safe?" she questioned. "Safe?"

He answered her, his keen eyes watching her face the while, his fingers, infinitely tender, seeking to staunch her wound.

She smiled at him in her old, swift fashion as he knelt beside her. "I look like a boy, don't I?" she asked. "I'm glad I saved poor Jack. I wish——"

She broke off suddenly, fixing her large eyes earnestly upon him. "It's no good!" she said softly; "it's no good! You can do nothing for me. And you know it."

And when he stammeringly denied it, begging her brokenly to try to live for him, she shook her head and told him she was "quite content!"

"Send them all away," she asked. "I want to speak to you—alone."

"Paul," her fingers slid into his own, "Jack never cared for me."

"What did it matter?" he asked. "What did anything matter now?"

"You thought I loved him, but I never did. It was Norette he cared for. But I was afraid the gossips might say things about her, so I let them think it was to see me he came. I never knew him as other than Jack Hazeldean, nor did I ever guess the sort of life he led. Not until the night he came to the farm half-dying. Then I had suspicions, the next day I understood."

"Why had she not told him? How much bitterness of suffering might have been spared them both?"

"Best as it is!" she said. And then, "My love could never have brought you happiness. Best as it is!"

She did not speak again, but lay quite still, while his arms clasped her jealously, as though to hold her as his own even against the King of Terrors.

In the hush of the quiet night Paul knelt beside her. The shadows of the trees—touched here and there with silver—fell like a veil upon the earth.

"Dear heart," she murmured, "it grows cold!"

Closer he clasps her, raining kisses on her hair, her eyes, her lips.

At last she stirred, and with some difficulty raised herself level with his face. Resting her hands upon his shoulders, she gazed into his eyes with a look of infinite longing, a look that bridged the gulf that lies between this life and eternity. [illegible] as she gazed she stood upon the other side. Esther [illegible]at—and the remembrance brought his solace [illegible] come—she had died happy—died in his arms, [illegible]oved most dearly in the world. She who was [illegible]y? Well, not altogether. For love is stronger [illegible]airer than life; and in that other world, Esther [illegible]loves still.

Orme Lewis.

REGARDING OUR SOCIETY REVELATIONS.

Since Short Stories introduced the new form of article, of which "The Confessions of Cynthia" was the first, I have received hundreds of letters from readers who cast a doubt on many points in the stories. These readers I have, I am pleased to say, been able to convince, and to remove any doubts from their minds.

One point raised concerned the absurd pet names used in Society. The truth of Cynthia's statements is now borne out by the newspaper reports of a great Society law-suit at the moment of writing being tried. In this law-suit one of the litigants supplied the court with a list of the names of her personal friends (many of whom were titled people) together with their pet names. This list was as follows:—

Real Name.	Pet Name.
Lord C.	"Toby," or "Bobs."
Mr. L.	"Pickles."
Lady H.	"Hydey."
Mrs. G.	"Midget."
Mrs. B.	"Aggie."
Lord A.	"Pater."
Sir C. H.	"Topps," or "Bundle."
Mr. B.	"Buck."
Lord H.	"Warrior."
Mr. O.	"D.S.O."
Lord C.	"Rock."
Capt. B.-H.	"Tommy."

Reference to the morning papers of December 3rd last, will bear out this statement.

After this I am sure doubting readers will have no hesitation in believing that the pet names which appeared in "The Confessions of Cynthia," and which will be found in "How I Chaperoned Belinda," are in no way exaggerated.

Result of the "Title" Competition.

The Gramophones have been awarded as follows:

F. H. England, 30 Grafton Street, C-on-M, Manchester.
J. Foster, care of J. Love, 63 Dufferin Avenue, Dublin.
R. Jones, 27 Latimer Street, Liverpool.
Reed Ison, 73 Dartmouth Park Road, N.W.
Miss E. Skerry, Clifden Lodge, New Road, Ascot.
F. Wright, 13 Richmond Terrace, Aberdeen.
J. W. Ryder, 233 Spa Road, Bolton, near Manchester.
Thos. Wragg, Edensor, Bakewell, Derbyshire.
Mrs. Stanley, 30 Garturk Street, Govanhill, Glasgow.
C. Barlow, 3 Victoria Avenue, Alma Park, Levenshulme.

Result of the Madge Morris Wedding Cake Competition.

An Edinburgh girl wins the centre ornament.

Her name is: Miss M. Humphrey, 24 Castle Street, Edinburgh. The list of the hundred competitors who won pieces of the wedding cake is too long to publish here but can be had on application.

What He Would Propose.

"This year if any mistletoe within her 'old oak hall' is found, I'm going to propose to her—to leave it there the whole year round."

He Didn't Like It.

"What was the trouble between you and young Mr. Softy?" "Why, he said his brain was on fire, and I broke a hand grenade over his head."

Swellington's Mistake.

Swellington (at the ball): "I wonder if that plain woman over there is really trying to flirt with me?" Cooler (politely): "I can easily find out, sir, by asking her. She's my wife."

Altogether Too Good.

Mrs. Hicks: "Bear in mind, young man, that Santa Claus brings presents only to good little boys." Dick Hicks: "That just hits me. I've been so good for a month that none of the boys will play with me."

He Looked Ahead.

Garry: "As you intend to marry her, why did you consent to her riding a bicycle, when you are so opposed to them?" Merritt: "Well, I knew she would have her way in the end, and I calculated that by giving in now her father would have to pay for the machine."

Poor Artist!

Wealthy Amateur: "Since you spoke to Jones and myself about this Christmas scene, Cadmium, we have arranged that one of us shall have it." Cadmium (brightening): "I am glad of that, very glad; glad on your account, too. Which of you has it?" Wealthy Amateur: "Well, we are going to toss up for it, and the one that loses takes the picture."

Warm Affection.

They skated one Christmas, but little they said, for they'd just been made known to each other, but he wished as they over the bright surface sped, that they thus might through life be together. A crash—they went through! "Oh, how awkward!" cried she. "'Tisn't deep; but has anyone seen us?" "Never mind—let me tell you—I love you," said he, "since the ice is now broken between us."

Sacrifice the First.

He had been working all the winter to get a place in the brass band as a cornet player, and just as his hopes seemed to be on the verge of fulfilment, she met him on his way home from the post-office. "George, I wish you wouldn't play the cornet in the new band." "Why not?" said he, in surprise. "It is the place of honour, and I get a great deal of attention by it, dear." "Yes, I know," she said coaxingly. "It is so nice to have you noticed by everyone, and all that, dear, but——" She paused and hung her curly head a little lower. "But what?" said he sharply. "Blowing the cornet makes—makes——" Her voice sank to a pouting whisper. "Makes the lips so stiff and hard?" George has decided not to be the cornet player in the band.

Christmas License.

Stern Father of the Girl: "I saw you kiss my daughter at our party last night, and I want you to know I don't like it." Young Man: "You may not; but I do."

An Appropriate Keepsake.

"I presume you carry a memento of some sort in that locket of yours?" "Precisely, it is a lock of my husband's hair." "But your husband is still alive!" "Yes, sir; but his hair is all gone."

Tit for Tat.

He.: "When will you learn that razors are not the things to sharpen slate pencils with?" She: "I don't know. I suppose as soon as you've learnt that hairpins are not intended to clean out pipes!"

And He Did.

She: "Don't you feel a draught over there near the window?" He (taking the hint): "I don't know that I do. What would you advise me to do: pull the blind down, or move over nearer to you?" She: "Both."

The Actor's Farewell.

Physician: "You cannot possibly follow your profession more than five or six years longer. I have known it for a long time." Star Actor (wrathfully): "Then you ought to have told me before this. You have cheated me out of several farewell seasons."

How a Girl Catches a Ball.

When a girl tries to catch a ball she throws her arms wide apart, waits until the ball hits her on the nose, turns her hands with a windmill motion, runs after the ball, picks it up, brushes her hair out of her eyes, and smiles, as though her way of doing it cannot be improved upon.

The Uses of Friends.

Jinks: "I tell you what it is, there is nothing like having lots of friends." Winks: "I presume not." Jinks: "No, sir. Just as quick as I lose a situation, my friends all rush round hunting for a new place for me, so as to save me the trouble of borrowing money from them."

Adding Insult to Injury.

She (just kissed): "How dare you, sir?" He: "I hope you will pardon me. I didn't think." She: "Think! Of course you didn't think. But your inability to think is no excuse for your conduct. I suppose you mean to tell me that if you had stopped to think you would not have wanted to kiss me."

All Men are Fools.

Old Friend: "Well, how is your flying machine getting on?" Inventor: "Getting along? I finished that twenty years ago. Every detail is complete. There it stands, ready to go." "Why don't you show it to the world?" "Can't. All men are fools." "What's the matter?" "Can't find a man anywhere with sense enough to climb up a steeple and try it."

A Christmas Terror.

The stout man with a large package beneath his arm hurried through the crowded thoroughfare, closely pursued by a small man of haggard aspect, with a thick stick in his hand. On and on, relentless as the ticking of a clock, the forlorn man dogged the other, and those who passed him heard an occasional word drop from his lips, indicative of despair, of awful terror. Finally some of the crowd turned and followed the pair, determined not to miss the fun. The crowd grew larger, and finally a bold man went up to the person of haggard countenance. "What's the matter?" he asked. The little man turned. "Matter?" he echoed. "See that man with a bundle? He is my next-door neighbour, and in that bundle he has a drum which he has bought for his small son to play upon." But the crowd waited no longer. It surged ahead with relentless fury and left him to work out his own vengeance, and when peace had been restored the remains of a battered man and a battered drum lay upon the pavement.

A Modern Cinderella.

And of the Prince Who Won Her.

"Mamma, mamma, what do you think?" cried Lyda Stuart, as she rushed into the room where her mother sat, with flushed cheeks and dishevelled hair. "I have found two tickets for the ball to-morrow night—no name or anything on them by which I could trace the owner—and oh, mamma, I want to use them; I want to go!"

"But, my dear," espostulated Mrs. Stuart, as Lyda paused breathlessly, "how——"

"Why, you kept one or two of my evening gowns, you know, mother, and I am sure the white one would do beautifully, and Tom is still quite presentable in his dress suit even if it is a bit tight—and here are the tickets, so why not? The only thing is that I want you to go too, darling," with an emphatic kiss on her mother's cheek.

"I should not care in the least about it, dear, and am afraid you will be disappointed."

"Oh, I know I shall be *in* it, and not *of* it, but that does not matter. I shall enjoy just watching it all, and hearing the music. I may combine business with pleasure, too, mamma, by getting some new ideas for my sketches."

"We will see what your brother says, dear," Mrs. Stuart answered.

She would have been loth indeed to deprive this daughter of hers of any pleasure that might come in her way, for in the reverses that had fallen on the family since Mr. Stuart's death, his wife's greatest grief had been for Lyda. The disaster had come on the very eve of her coming out, and ever since they left their beautiful English home and came to this big, seething, lonely American city, Lyda had worked steadily at illustrating.

Now she was making a success at it, and there was also beginning to be quite a demand for her dainty water-colour work.

When Tom came home, Lyda immediately pounced upon him, and related her wonderful news. He readily agreed to take her, but he warned her that they would not be likely to meet any of their few acquaintances, and that therefore she would have to be satisfied to dance with him, or be simply a spectator at her first ball.

The next day they scanned the papers for some mention of the tickets, but none appeared, so they felt justified in using them.

That night Lyda was all excitement. The white gown had required very little alteration, and as Mrs. Stuart put the finishing touches to her daughter's toilet, she felt very pardonable motherly pride in her.

"How do you like me, Tom?" Lyda asked, as she entered the little sitting-room.

Tom whistled. "By Jove!" he ejaculated, as he gazed at the picture framed in the doorway. She laughed happily, taking innocent pleasure in his astonished admiration.

"I knew you were good-looking, Lyda, but you're quite too stunning to-night; isn't she, mother?"

"She does look pretty, but we mustn't turn this bright little head with too much flattery. Remember it is only for one night," Mrs. Stuart answered a little sadly.

Tom wished that his own head were a trifle steadier. It had been aching most fearfully all day, but he would not say a word to mar Lyda's pleasure or to cause his mother any anxiety.

He felt rewarded for the effort he had made when he saw how much Lyda enjoyed her novel experience, and in listening to her bright comments on the glittering panorama.

Tom feared that dancing might tax his powers of endurance too far, and was wondering what excuse to make to Lyda, when a hearty voice exclaimed: "Why, if it isn't Tom Stuart!" And a friend from their native land shook him vigorously by the hand.

Lyda was soon gliding round with this friend of her childhood. She naïvely explained to him how they happened to be at the ball, so he took great pains to introduce his friends, and after that she did not lack for partners.

Flushed and happy, she finally went to prepare for her home-going. When she emerged from the cloak-room, she expected to find Tom waiting for her, but he was nowhere to be seen, and she stood rather nervously watching for him.

As she looked rather anxiously about for her brother, she happened to encounter the gaze of a man who stood near. He was distinguished looking, and Lyda had noticed him several times during the evening, secretly wishing that she might have met him.

As she looked up, he seemed to realise that he had been staring at her, for he started a little and turned away.

Lyda did not know what to do. Where could Tom be? If only one of the men she had met would pass that way. Her trepidation increased. Noticing this, the man who was still covertly watching her approached.

"Can I be of any assistance to you?" he asked courteously, "perhaps I could find the person you are looking for?"

"It is my brother," Lyda half gasped, raising a pair of very frightened blue eyes. Meeting his kindly, encouraging look, she hurried on.

"I thought he would be here, and cannot understand what keeps him. Ah, there he is! Thank you so much," as Tom hurried to her, looking very white.

"Why, Tom, what is the matter?" she questioned anxiously, noting his pallor.

Hugh Thurston stepped aside, wishing devoutly that "Tom" had not appeared quite so soon. Of course, he was glad that the sister's anxiety was relieved, but he very much wanted to know who she was.

"Why, I had a sort of giddy faint spell, little girl," Tom explained hastily. "My head has bothered me all day. Awfully sorry—hope you have not been frightened."

"I was rather, but it's no matter. I am so sorry you are ill; why didn't you say so, and we could have gone home sooner? This gentleman"—nodding towards Thurston—"had just offered to go in search of you."

Tom turned to Thurston and thanked him briefly, explaining his own delay. Lyda bowed a slight acknowledgment as they passed, but something in his eyes as they met hers made her heart give a sudden bound and brought a deeper flush to her cheeks.

"Who on earth can she be?" Thurston wondered. Evidently they had not come in a carriage, for she wore a hat, and a dark ulster hid her ball gown, and he knew from her accent that she was English.

Looking down, he saw a little gold pin lying in the corner where she had stood while waiting for her brother. Picking it up, he hurried downstairs and searched the corridor for her, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Thurston started to take the pin to the desk, but he changed his mind, and tucked it away in his card case. Then he went back to the ballroom and tried to find out who she was. But no one seemed to recognise his description. In such a crowd, in fact, there were many who might have answered to it, so

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Thurston was forced to leave without obtaining any clue to her identity.

He marvelled at the depth of the impression that this girl's face had made upon him. His wealth and good looks won him so much favour among women, that he had come to regard them with great indifference.

He inserted an advertisement concerning the pin, but no answer ever came, and he strove to forget the owner, but many times the blue eyes seemed to look at him through the smoke rings, or come unbidden between him and a printed page.

The day after the ball, poor Tom was in a raging fever, and the weeks which followed were anxious ones indeed in the Stuart's little home, for Tom had a bad case of typhoid.

Their small savings dwindled rapidly, and Lyda worked incessantly to renew resources. Mrs. Stuart became so worn by her vigil at the sick boy's side, that the doctor feared that she too would be attacked by the disease.

Lyda, worrying about her mother, grieving because she thought that she had aggravated Tom's illness by taking him to the ball, and working even harder than usual, had grown thin and pale, and there were heavy circles under the blue eyes.

One afternoon, as she was doggedly putting the finishing touches to some dinner cards that were to be called for that day, the bell rang.

"Come in," Lyda called softly, thinking it was the doctor. "Go right in, doctor," she added, without turning her head. She was not willing that he should see the traces of tears that *would* brim over occasionally and impede her progress.

"I beg pardon, but my sister sent me for the cards," said a voice that was certainly not the doctor's. She rose quickly.

"Oh, pardon me," she exclaimed, then stopped short as she recognised her "ball man," as she had mentally termed him.

Hugh Thurston started eagerly forward.

"You!" he cried, with a glad ring in his voice, "you!"—I have so often tried to find you since the ball. But child," taking her hand gently in his as he saw her pale cheeks and tired eyes, "what have they done to you?"

The cheeks became so crimson and the eyes so wide with astonishment that he came suddenly to himself and dropped her hands.

"Of course, you don't understand," he explained rather lamely. "You've probably never given me a thought." The blue eyes were suddenly veiled. "You didn't leave any slipper behind that I might know of but—I found your pin after you had gone and I wanted to find the owner." He had pulled out his card case while he was speaking and now he handed the pin—a lover's knot with a diamond centre—to her.

"But it is not mine," she said, looking up with a demure little smile.

"Isn't it?" he asked surprisedly. "It doesn't matter though"—somewhat irrelevantly—"for I've done better than find the 'owner'—I've found the princess," and as their eyes met, the princess knew that the prince had come.

Winifred Alan.

CRITIC (who has dropped in for a little talk): "And what are your views on marriage?" Artist (in no humour for argument): "Oh, I am wedded to my art." Critic: "And I suppose you, too, consider marriage a failure?"

"GREAT thing—presence of mind," said Gooding; "I might have been a rich man to-day if my presence of mind had not failed me one time." "Indeed! When was that?" asked a friend. "You remember my uncle George—rich old duffer? You know I am his heir. Well, sir, I was with him one day when he was taken with a fit. I was so frightened that I lost my presence of mind and called in a doctor, and uncle George is living yet."

A REMARKABLE LETTER.

GIFT OF £50 FROM ONE READER TO THE REST.

We have received the following communication from an anonymous correspondent living in America:

DAYTON, OHIO, U.S.A.
NOVEMBER 25th, 1902.

DEAR EDITOR AND FRIEND,

IN February, 1894, I received from you a cheque for £10 as a prize in connection with a competition that ran in SHORT STORIES.

That £10 was the foundation of a fortune which I have now, thank God, accumulated. I was a single young man at the time, and could find no employment in England. So, with the help of the £10, I emigrated to America, and, after knocking about New York for a few months, found my way to Dayton. Here I started in the cycle business and, when the boom came in 1897 and 1898, I made a lot of money. This money I speculated with and have now turned into a fortune.

My reason for writing you is to express my gratitude to you for having offered the £10, and to say that I have now decided to give to the readers of SHORT STORIES through the medium of your paper five times this amount every year I am spared.

I therefore inclose you bills for two hundred and fifty dollars, and ask you to distribute these in five sums of £10 each amongst the readers of SHORT STORIES in a competition the nature of which I leave to yourself. All I ask is that the announcement may be made and the competition closed in time for the prize money to reach the winners during February, which is the month in which I received my first £10.

You are of course at liberty to publish this letter, but I do not append my name as I have no desire for notoriety and simply make this offer out of pure gratitude in the hope that those who receive the £10 prizes will turn them to as good account as I was able to turn my £10.

Your Obedient Servant,

DAYTON.

(Next week, the competition in which the five prizes of £10 each are offered will appear.—Ed. S.S.)

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A Dangerous Test.

Which Nearly Ended in Disaster.

"Miss Anstey, allow me to introduce Mr. Gurden," said the actor-manager to his principal lady in the green room, between the acts.

She smiled, bent her head, and at once made him feel at home in her society.

From the stalls of that provincial theatre Gurden had watched her during five nights of the company's fortnight's stay in the town, had watched her with growing interest, as she displayed her talent in a characteristically unaffected manner. He was not a hanger-on of actresses, but a bank cashier with a serious outlook in life, although still in his early thirties. Having been introduced to the manager, Gurden had openly expressed a wish to know Miss Anstey, hence his introduction. Their talk was not made up of the usual platitudes of such occasions; it was more like that of an interview by a journalist in search of "copy." His few frank compliments charmed her, they were so natural, so much of the man himself. At the outset he was plainly an admirer, but not one of the common sort, and this fact there and then put him into favour.

Her interval was a long one. When it ended he left the green room with an encouraging invitation to drop in any evening during the company's stay in Illchester; as he did so, he was followed by the intent gaze of the "juvenile lead," the one who is popularly known as the hero of the play. He (described on the bills as Mr. Henry Montgomery), from an unobserved corner, had narrowly watched the interview; but not more narrowly than Betty Scarsdale, the low comedy actress. A young man of fine physique and a good-looking face, his admiration of Miss Anstey was an open secret to every member of the company. To her he had declared love—"an undying, ardent passion," had been his avowal; to which she had given a quiet negative, kept the affair private, and maintained the even tenor of her way as though such an occurrence had never come about.

"A new admirer," mused Montgomery, as he gave some fresh touches to his "make-up" before the green room mirror whilst awaiting his turn to go on, "and a serious one—that I can see by the cut of his face. Well, it will go hard with him or me if he makes Alice Anstey his wife; for, by Heaven, if he does, there will be a real tragedy for some of us to play. He's not one of the common or garden hangers-on at stage-doors, that's evident. At any rate, I'm going to watch them, if she remains here, when we break up next week; thanks to the powers that be, I can find somewhere to stay here, if she does."

With that he went out to take his turn before the audience.

As he passed out, Betty Scarsdale entered from the stage. "M'm," ran her thoughts, "I am keeping an eye on you, Mr. Smith. You think yourself safe here, that no one knows your past, and you can do as you like; but what about poor May Brander, whom you left in the States, and the scandalous trick you played her brother? Of course, you don't think that I know these things; and you would be equally surprised to hear that May and I were at school together and that I met her after you had left her across the Atlantic, and was given a message to you, one that would soften the heart of any but a wretch like you. But I shall not deliver it, now that I know what you are—I think that May is better off without you, or any of your kind. Ten to one you have somehow got to know that Alice has a private fortune of her own; if you didn't I'll bet that you would not be so keen on making her think that you love her. But I'm going to see a happy 'curtain' to this drama in real life, so far as Alice has a part in it, if it costs me every penny of my savings to lie by and watch the play."

On the following night Gurden took advantage of Miss Anstey's invitation to drop into the green-room for a few minutes between the acts. The company of which she formed a member was a repertoire one, giving a fresh play every other evening; so that to his friends his new and violent liking for a theatre seemed more for a play than for its leading actress. But had they known of his nightly visits to the green-room they would probably have felt some alarm that so eminently respectable and serious-minded a bank cashier was becoming the regular companion of strolling players.

One visit led to another. Then, at Gurden's cost, came a supper party at an adjacent hotel—the members being himself, the manager, Miss Anstey and Betty, the latter having thus far kept the whole secret of what she knew relative to Montgomery's doings in America. On the succeeding Sunday evening (the day after the company broke up), these four sat down to a tastefully arranged little dinner at Miss Anstey's rooms. Here it was that Gurden had his first experience of her society in private life. He had been charmed with her as an actress. As a lady far removed from all stage matters, in which light he now saw her, he was enchanted. Up to this he had, to himself only, frankly and wholly admired her. Now he was deeply in love with her. That night he went away thinking her perfect, the first of her sex. Hitherto his life had been spent in work, without a thought of womankind. Motherless and with no sisters, he had grown to manhood altogether outside the influence of woman. Eight years in a town many miles from his native place, and all the time in lonely "diggings," had made him something of a recluse. Now the whole strength of his deep, reserved natura was stirred. He loved as few men love; loved to such an extent that he could not hide it.

And she—the dullest of women, could not but see his bent. To him she was no more than a poor actress dependent on her talent for a living. What wonder then that she respected his passion, was touched by it, and decided to remain a while in Illchester? This last item was told to Betty, with whom Miss Anstey was on very friendly terms. Betty said that she had already determined to take a "rest" in the place (as theatrical people term a spell of idleness), for which fib it is to be hoped that the recording angel forgave her.

Towards the end of that week Gurden called to spend an evening by appointment with Miss Anstey. After some music they sat talking a while. Then he rose to go. The coldness of the night necessitated an overcoat, and when he was about to put it on she stepped forward to help him. That was the crisis, the psychological moment when his love was too great to withstand.

"Alice!—Miss Anstey!" he murmured in a low, deep passionate tone, "I——may I?" He had refaced her. His right hand was half round her waist. In his left hand hers was gripped in a manner that gave a pleasurable pain. Abashed at his own abruptness, fearful of giving offence or of speaking too soon, he stopped as suddenly as he had commenced to declare his love. They stood almost facing each other, her large grey eyes looking up in an inquiring, half-shy, half-encouraging way at his earnest face.

Her quietude and open gaze gave him new assurance.

"Miss Anstey," he began again, "I should like to tell you something, to ask you something; but——"

Had he been more accustomed to women he would have known that her warm passivity was proof of how ready and willing she was to hear what he had to say. "Perhaps I

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ought not to—I may be trespassing on your kindness. I——" Was the opportunity to slip by? Would he drift from the subject, leaving it merely suggested? Would she have to wait for another occasion, never hear what he really had to say, or help him to say it now? And yet was there truly any need of it being said? On his part, was not that arm about her waist sufficient? On hers, the quiet bearing, and the passive happiness on her face were surely satisfactory pledges that she both knew and accepted what he wished to say. They had known each other only a fortnight. They were standing in the position of acknowledged lovers, he to her and she to him. What need could there be for more declaration? Only that, in view of what might be inferred this way or that, a few words would prevent misunderstandings. He seemed unlikely to say them as matters stood. Hence she saved the situation by remarking:

"Yes, you have something to tell me. What?"

"That I love you!"

"Why," she smilingly answered, "I knew that, you silly. I thought it was some news you had."

"And I want you to marry me—to be my wife."

"Well, that is the natural conclusion—isn't it?—although not always arrived at." She was inclined to a pleasantly jocular mood, but made not the slightest effort to free herself from his half-embrace. There was between them an affinity that sent reserve far into the background and was quickly making them feel at home under each other's touch; yet he scarcely knew how to take her mood.

"But you, Alice?" he said, anxiety marking his voice; "I may call you Alice—may I not?"

"Of course you may. What else should you call me?" was her sweetly tantalising reply.

"But you?" he repeated interrogatively.

"Ah, me?" She turned away from him, naturally and gently, not as if wishful to be from his side. "I am afraid I don't understand myself and shall never be satisfied." He watched her movements tenderly, as she partially crossed the room. "Do you know," she added, with a winning smile, turning and pausing by a table on which she rested one hand, "I have registered a vow never to marry any man, though he be a prince, a hero, or a genius, unless he first proves his love by some very great sacrifice. Am I not quixotic? I know I am romantic. But there, men are so light in their love; and I have made my vow and must keep it. In fact, I *shall* keep it, no matter how I love; for I could not believe in his love if I did not test it in some uncommon way. Is it not foolish of me? But then, you know, we are all foolish in some way or other at some time or other."

Here she returned slowly and smilingly to him. He took her gently in his arms, kissed her, said that he was ready to make any sacrifice she could suggest and went his way, feeling that he had suddenly entered on a new life.

* * * * *

"Is the manager in?" It was Montgomery who put this question to the first clerk he saw behind the counter of the branch bank where Gurden was cashier.

"I think so. What name, please?" was the answer.

Montgomery took out his card-case, drew one from it, wrote a few words on the pasteboard, then handed it to the clerk, who proceeded with it to an inner office, reading the written message *en route*. In a couple of minutes he returned and ushered Montgomery into the manager's private room.

"Good day, Mr. Montgomery," said the bald-headed manager, as his clerk disappeared. "Take a seat. I see by your card that you have a letter of introduction from our chief secretary."

"I have," answered Montgomery, handing forward the letter.

"So you wish to become a bank clerk, Mr. Montgomery?" the manager said, looking up from his perusal of the missive.

"Yes, I should be very glad of an opportunity in that way," he replied; "and Mr. Davies" (the secretary), "who was a friend of my mother's family, thought you were in need of one."

"Well, I am, and as Mr. Davies so strongly recommends you, I shall be pleased to give you a start. You have, I see," (referring to the letter) "worked in a bank before, although it is some years ago." He went on to talk of the vacant post, salary and promotion: then Montgomery departed, to begin his new duties on the following morning, muttering to himself—"Now, Mr. Gurden, it's you or me for the prize, and if my ingenuity cannot get you disgraced here, it won't be for the want of trying."

* * * * *

"How late she is!" Gurden murmured under his breath, as he produced his watch, gave it a glance, and returned it. The pointers indicated ten minutes past nine. "She promised to be here at eight-forty-five, and I don't see anything of her yet." His eyes searched the street to right and left.

There was an anxious, troubled look in his intelligent blue eyes, and about his mouth a drawn expression, accompanied by a nervous twitching of the brows. It was the night of the shopman's holiday; few people were about, and he was pacing to and fro outside an arcade in Illchester.

"Isn't she coming, I wonder?" And again he paused, examined his watch, replaced it, and resumed his slow march from about twenty yards on one side of the arcade to the same distance on the other.

Fifteen minutes past nine—nine thirty-five—a quarter to ten, and yet she came not. Still more anxious grew his expression, more troubled the look in his eyes, and more restless his movements. Again and again he peered into the arcade and round the long, street-like square in which he walked. The look of a condemned man for a reprieve could not be more full of expectant anxiety than was Gurden's; but his eyes were still unrewarded, and his heart increased its beating.

"What *can* be the matter?" he, in his strained condition, muttered half-aloud; and a passing newsboy gave him a questioning glance. "What has kept her, I wonder? Surely she has not made a mistake! I told her plain enough to meet me here, and she knows the place," he noiselessly continued. "Can she have suddenly been taken ill, or some accident have happened to her? Something *must* have gone wrong, or she would be here, I know." Another five minutes of terrible suspense passed away, five minutes which seemed five hours to the conscience-stricken man.

"My God!" he at last cried within himself, "I can't stand this any longer. I *must* know what is the matter. After the horror I have gone through, I'm not going to let the thing slip now." He abruptly turned on his heel, and hurried away to a thoroughfare on the opposite side of that busy centre of the town. Presently he opened the front gate of the house where he had spent some very happy evenings (though the succeeding nights had been followed by a hot conflict between love and conscience). He bounded up the six stone steps and gave a spasmodic knock at the door, which was quickly opened by a prim little servant maid.

"Is Miss Anstey in?" he eagerly asked.

"No, sir. She left early this mornin', and took all 'er luggage away with 'er."

"Did she say anything about coming back?"

"No — she said she shouldn't be comin' back no more."

"Has she left any message for me?"

"No, sir, not as I knows of. Wait a minute, please, an' I'll see." She disappeared within. Soon the girl returned with the message that Miss Anstey had left no message of any kind for anyone.

"Thank you." He sprang down the steps and made all possible haste in

Turn to pages 792 and 819 and win a Gramophone.

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TWENTY SPLENDID GRAMOPHONES are offered for Competition in this Number.

the direction of the town. Again he entered the square, fully expecting to see her whom he sought waiting for him. But his intense gaze failed to find her. During the next three or four minutes he stood in doubt. He was weighing the advisability of what best to do. Then the look of troubled irresolution passed away. He turned up his coat collar (for the nights had grown colder than the one when a lift at his overcoat had brought about a declaration of love), buttoned the garment, meanwhile saying to himself, "I suppose I must get out of this; there's nothing else for it now," and strode off in the direction of Fleetthorpe, a village four miles away.

On some rising ground just without the town he paused, and looked back at the wide group of lights below him, which he expected he was leaving for the last time—and leaving a disgraced name behind him. But self-accusing retrospection was then useless. He had cast the die—the hazard was his, and he had taken it, though certainly not without much thought, and as the last desperate thing to win her.

Like many another good, and many a better, man, he had bartered away his fair prospects and the well-earned reputation of fifteen years of honest dealing in business and private matters—all to please and win a woman.

He turned his face once more towards the darkness where lay Fleetthorpe. A lump rose in his throat. He smothered a sigh, muttering, "Yes, that will be the best thing to do now; go on, and stop there to-night; then catch the first train in the morning. I mustn't be seen to leave Illchester by rail—a cabman might recognise me; and if I get to Liverpool by three to-morrow afternoon, I shall be soon enough. Yes, that's what I'll do; probably she has gone on ahead. She must have made some mistake and will put it right." He stepped forward at a brisk pace, his head drooped in conscious shame.

When he had walked about a mile he checked his speed somewhat; then, as if acting on a sudden impulse, he came to an abrupt halt at a bend in the road. For the space of a minute or so he stood quite still. His face was turned towards the town again. "I might put it back and make things all right," he said, under his breath. "I should be glad to, if I were sure of not seeing Alice again." With her name her image rose in his mind. A sigh fully escaped him, and he muttered, "But if she has gone on to Liverpool—she is surely awaiting me there."

Again he swung round and began to increase the distance between himself and Illchester. At that juncture, just as the curve in the road was fully rounded, he thought he heard a scuffle; then a faint cry reached his ears. "Heavens!" he whispered, "there's something wrong going on here, surely." His head was slightly drooped and turned aside, with one ear in the direction whence the sound had come. Again he distinctly heard a muffled cry, and with a couple of bounds he passed through a gap in the hedge between the road and the woodland that skirted it. Here he paused and listened. Now he was sure he heard a struggle going on, and he rushed forward amongst the trees—his feet scattering and crunching the dry leaves and twigs as he went. Other footsteps sounded on the still night air. He doubled round a huge cluster of bramble bushes and paused at the sight of a woman motionless on the ground.

"Merciful powers, there *is* something wrong!" burst from him. Then he leapt forward, casting a hurried glance round; but seeing no one, he stooped, raised the still form, and, half-dragging, half-carrying her, he bore her to where the ghostly light of the rising moon made the woman's features look ghastly in their whiteness. The instant he reached an open space he laid the burden down and bent his gaze on her face.

"Oh, horrors, it is Alice!" hescried out, dropping on his knees by her side. In an instant her head was on his arm. He called her name eagerly, and wildly ran his hand over her head in search of possible injuries, and was greatly relieved when he found none. Now he chafed her hands and now her temples, white and almost pulseless; now he passionately kissed her, and again repeatedly called her by name. But there was still no sign of returning consciousness. He sprang to his feet and stood irresolute. He knew not what to do. Again he dropped on his knees. Once more he chafed her hands and face; again he kissed her and spoke her name in her ear, while his frame trembled with anxiety, and he grew impotently frantic at his helplessness. At last her eyelids slowly lifted, and her eyes—as her thoughts assumed a less chaotic taste—put on a frightened look.

"Oh, please let me go!" she faintly murmured; and, turning away, she endeavoured to rise.

"Alice! Alice!" he eagerly and gladly exclaimed. "Don't you know me? I'm Fred! Don't you know me, Alice?"

At the sound of his voice she made a move towards him, tremulously gazed at him for a moment, then murmuring, "Fred, Fred," she nestled to him like a frightened child to its mother.

When she had fully regained her self-possession, and he had led her on to the roadway, he asked her how she came to be in such a predicament.

"I was coming to meet you, when a hand suddenly covered my mouth, and I was dragged in there before I could cry out or do anything," she replied, indicating the place where he had found her.

"But however did you get here, Alice?"

"You said last night that it would be best to book from Fleetthorpe to Manchester and then re-book to Liverpool; so, when I sent my luggage on this morning (as you told me to) I thought I would come out here and spend the day at Fleetthorpe for a change, instead of remaining in Illchester. And I did so; and when the evening came, and it was time to come to meet you, I thought I would walk—the weather was so fine; but I think I started late and lost my way; then he (the man who had decamped) molested me."

"Has he hurt you much?" Fred anxiously inquired.

"No, dear," she answered, smiling to reassure him.

"You feel quite all right now?"

"Yes, but for the shock and a little rough shaking, I am no worse."

"I should like a chance of shaking him," Fred growled, as their conversation brought the molester back to his mind.

"Don't heed the unpleasant affair, dear; it isn't worth while to look for him, although he did seem familiar in the one glance I had of him."

"I don't know about the worth of the matter; but I should take good care to find him if we had time to spare. As it is we must be moving, Alice. We *must* catch the *Teutonic* to-morrow afternoon."

"But you haven't got the money, Fred, have you?" she asked, giving him a look wherein anxiety, incredulity, and fear struggled for the mastery. Now that the climax was reached her joy at proving her power over him was lost in her horror of what he had done to satisfy her.

"Yes, came the low, slow reply; and he turned away his shame-flushed, guilt-paled face. "I promised you I would, and I've done it," he added, in a voice full of bitter resignation

For a moment she looked at him with eyes full of a chaos of expressions, the predominant one being loving trust; then she instinctively poised herself on her toes, reached up her arms, clasped them round his neck, and breathlessly exclaimed:

"Oh, Fred, there's no need for it! I was only trying you, and I didn't think you would do it. I thought you would come at the last minute and say that you could not do it; then I would tell you all, and we would go away as we have arranged. Oh, what shall we do?" The enormity of the crime into which she had led him, in her foolish desire to test the strength of his affection for her, now flashed upon her

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with such force as to put all other thoughts and feelings completely in the background, and made her tremble at the probable consequence of her rash act.

"What do you mean?" he gasped.

"There is no need of it. I have plenty. I was only testing you!" She tearfully rejoined, her eyes drooping at the consciousness of her shame. "Oh, why did I induce you to do such a thing?"

"Do you really mean what you say?"

"Yes, dear. I have a private fortune—enough for us both. I was with the Gaiety Comedy Company only because I was fond of the stage. But, because of what I've seen with others, although I love you so, I wanted to see if yours was only a passing fancy; and that is why I proposed you should rob the bank, and we should go to South America with the money. I never thought you would do it, really. Oh, forgive me, Fred!"

"Thank God!" he devoutly murmured. "Don't cry, Alice," he gently said after they had stood some minutes in a contemplative embrace. "You know now that mine is no fleeting fancy; and the wrong that has been done can be undone, thank Heaven."

Footsteps were heard down the road behind them, coming their way—townwards. They moved slowly forward, on a strip of greensward by the side of the turnpike and overshadowed by the high thorn hedge. A dark form appeared, and was soon abreast of them.

"That's him!" involuntary whispered Alice.

Fred sprang into the middle of the road at a leap. "And Montgomery!" he cried. Whereat the other fled as if death were at his heels. After him went Gurden, at the spur of instinct; but Alice's voice crying, "Oh, Fred, Fred, don't leave me here alone!" caused him to give up the chase at once. He returned to her, and together they walked back to Illchester—she persuading him to take no further notice of Montgomery (if the runaway were indeed her late fellow-actor), but to put the money back on the following morning, resign his post, and accept half her fortune by an immediate private marriage.

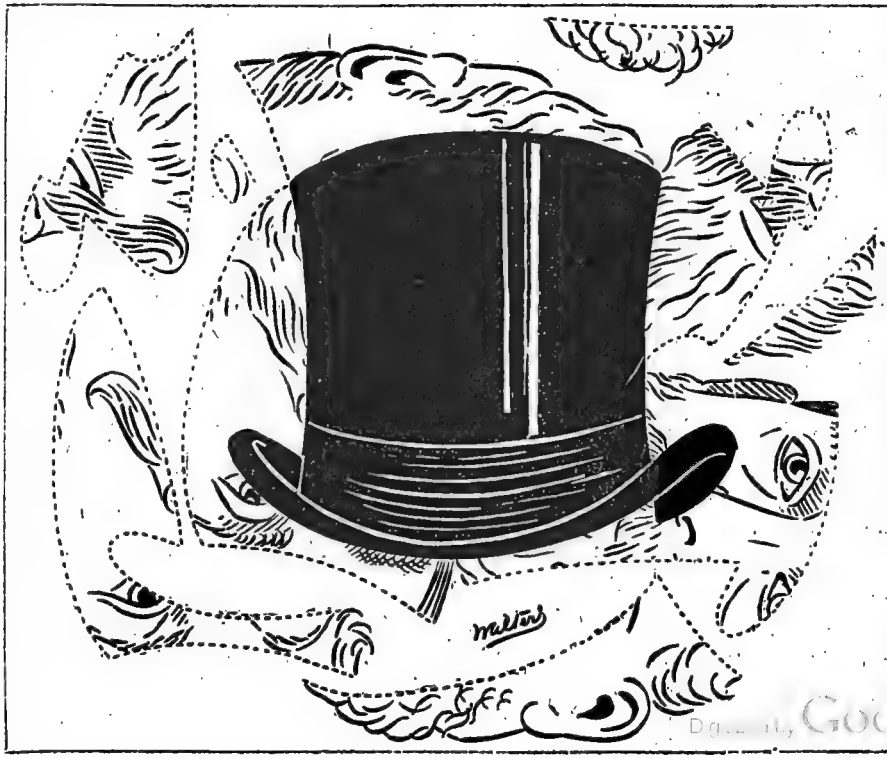
Early next day Gurden was at his desk, but not so soon as was Montgomery, who at once informed him (with a vengeful delight that could not be hidden), that the manager was waiting to see him "inside," meaning in the private room.

Gurden fully surmised that his sin had already been discovered, and rightly attributed that fact to Montgomery, who, late on the previous night, had called at the manager's house and so far assured him of Gurden's theft as to cause a very early attendance at the bank and an examination of his cashier's books.

When Gurden entered he saw his books on the manager's table and a severe look on the latter's face. Before his superior could speak he cut the matter short by confessing, in very few words, what he had done, putting the money on the table as he spoke, then verbally tendered his resignation, and expressed a hope that in view of his past, the matter would go no further. He had, he said, come to the bank before his usual time in order to replace what he had taken.

Whilst the manager spoke of his sorrow at the slip of so trusted a servant, his pleasure at the turn the affair was taking, and examined the money to see that all was right, a commotion began in the bank itself. The manager rose to ascertain the cause of this, and through the open door Gurden saw a detective arresting Montgomery on a charge, as the officer said, of embezzlement in the United States—a crime that was being paid for by the imprisonment of a partially-innocent man, the brother of the girl whom Montgomery had secretly married there and then left to work or starve, the affair on which Betty had mused when Gurden was introduced to Alice at the theatre. This was the last that Gurden ever saw of his criminal rival, of whose past he and Alice now heard from Betty. His resignation was accepted, and Betty told him at the wedding that he had merely exchanged an arduous post for a loving wife and ample means—whom she would have helped him to win had her services been needful.

J. E. Patterson.



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SERIAL STORY.

A FOE IN THE FAMILY

By NOWELL CAY.

Author of "The Presumption of Stanley Hay, M.P."

LAST INSTALMENT.

BIBLIOTECA BODLEIANA

A Tragic Event.

ILDEN was looking pale and haggard. His set face showed the signs of a long-drawn suspense. For more than twenty hours he had been seeking his wife without a moment's rest—without a moment's respite from the anxiety which consumed him.

The night had been wasted in following a false clue, provided by his detective. It had led to nothing, and the discovery of its futility had left him with barely time for the carrying out of his own plan—the only one which suggested itself.

He remembered that he had been determined to see Percival immediately after his father's funeral, and insist on his giving some account of his connection with Despard. It was more than ever important for him to do so now, when the discovery of Despard might solve the problem of Florence's disappearance; and he had started on the long journey north, chafing at the obstacles which an unkind Fate seemed determined to place in his way.

The trains had been delayed by fog, and just outside York there had been a slight accident which necessitated further waiting.

It had become certain, then, that he could not be present at the funeral, and to his annoyance at the unavoidable breaking of a promise was added the more serious consideration that he might lose his only chance of seeing Percival Ilden.

There was little doubt in his mind that his cousin would do his best to avoid him. It was only till the interment of his father that he could be sure of his whereabouts, and Ilden became more and more anxious and impatient as the time of the ceremony passed, finding him still in the train, but creeping nearer to his destination.

When he reached Mordenhale station at last it was to find that his anxiety had been justified. A pile of luggage bearing Percival's label stood on the platform.

"Mr. Ilden is leaving Mordenhale, then?" he said to the station-master.

"Yes, sir. He is going out of England, I believe. He is expecting to catch the four o'clock train."

Ilden glanced at his watch. There was time left for their interview, and he strode hastily up to the house to meet the man he sought in the hall.

The news of his arrival reached Grant as he was packing for his departure into the world, and put an end to a last uncertainty for him. He had been feeling that he was committed to assist Catherine in her search for her cousin until it ended. Now he had no tie to keep him, and relief at an ordeal avoided mingled itself with a less selfish relief to know that Catherine's fears had been unfounded.

There was no need to see her now, he told himself. It would be safer for him not to do so, and he seated himself to write her a farewell letter, a letter which tried his fortitude to the full.

Downstairs, meanwhile, Percival had concealed his instinctive disappointment at seeing Ilden alive to greet him with a show of geniality.

"Thank Heaven you have turned up, old man," he said, holding out his hand. "We have all been quite uneasy about you. It seemed so unlike you to miss the funeral. I am sorry you are too late even for the reading of the will. They are wrangling about it in there now."

George ignored the extended hand and the unusual show of geniality.

"I want a word with you, cousin Percival," he said, his voice hard and uncompromising.

His cousin had adopted his genial tone with deliberation however, and had no intention of abandoning it.

"By all means. Come in here. We can have a chat all to ourselves there, and I have no doubt I have news for you. Not that I can give you long. I have only been waiting for this sad business to finish to get away from this wretched climate, and my train goes at four."

He was leading the way as he spoke to the drawing-room, a long, low room on the ground floor opening through a conservatory upon the garden, and Ilden did not interrupt his speech until he had followed him within and closed the door.

Then he turned upon him with an abrupt incisive question.

"Where is my wife?"

Percival was still smiling.

"You speak as though I were Lady Ilden's keeper."

It seemed to George as though he were trying to gain time to think out an attitude, and he interrupted him sharply.

"You know where she is."

"At the present moment, no. Neither Lady Ilden nor Catherine cared to accept my invitation to stay here, so I cannot pretend to be acquainted with their precise whereabouts."

A shade of bewilderment was creeping into the tragic determination of George's mood, but he still spoke with accusing hostility.

"You admit that you have asked my wife here. You shall tell me before you leave this room where you saw her."

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"With the greatest pleasure. It was in the churchyard less than an hour ago, when I imagine that she was hoping for your appearance, and feeling uneasy that you did not come."

"It is a lie," said George. "You are trying to deceive me."

For answer Percival shrugged his shoulders and rang the bell.

"Will you kindly tell his lordship where Lady Ilden is at the present moment?" he said to the footman who answered it.

The man answered without hesitation.

"Nobody seems to know for certain, sir. They are looking for her in the grounds and in the Church wood. They say that she caught sight of the man the reward is offered for, and went after him by herself. But I was told they hadn't found either of them, and Miss Hay is in a great state, thinking he may have done her an injury."

It was very far from being the answer that Percival had expected, and the complacent smile faded from his face. He forgot to look for the effect of the announcement on his companion. Despard was in Mordenhale, if this story was true, and he reviled his own luck in not having got abroad a day earlier. He was questioning the footman with every sign of anxiety. According to the vague rumour which had already reached the house, Despard had watched the funeral from the coppice. It was thought that he had been waiting there to shoot Lord Ilden.

Percival's wits came back at the suggestion. It was not likely that the desperado would allow Lady Ilden to overtake him. Till she had given him his sister's message there was more to be hoped for than feared from the presence of the two men in the same spot. He turned to his cousin.

"I did not know Despard was here. Lady Ilden will need our assistance. This is the shortest cut to the Church wood, where she was last seen. I will follow you in a moment when I have found a revolver. From what we have seen of Despard, he appears to be a desperate character."

But George was already questioning the footman excitedly, trying to discover the spot at which his wife had last been seen, and he had hurried through the conservatory and into the grounds before Percival's sentence was finished.

It was not till he was running across the lawn that a doubt entered his mind of the truth of this story he had heard, strange and incredible as it sounded. It came to him with a sudden deceiving clearness that the footman had been prepared with it. It was a trick intended only to get rid of him until Percival had obtained the start of him on his flight out of England.

He stopped undecidedly, and took out his watch. It wanted twenty-five minutes only to four when Percival's train left the station, and, with a sudden resolve, he turned back.

His cousin should not be lost sight of. He should come with him on his search, and he turned back, unconscious of the fact that he had been seen by Guy Despard and Florence, as he stepped out on the lawn.

To Florence his appearance had seemed in the light of a miracle. She was half afraid that it must only be an illusion of desire. How was it possible that George could be at the house alive and well and she not know it? Then the thought of his danger came to make his appearance seem more real. It was really her husband; but Despard would see him and kill him.

She had pursued the unkempt figure which she had recognised from the churchyard, catching a glimpse of him now and again among the trees, but failing to overtake him or make him turn his head in answer to her appeals. The

(Continued on next page.)

Swallowed 150 Coins.

A MAN'S ASTOUNDING FEAT.

An astounding case was reported recently in the *Lancet*. A poor Pathan who was crossing the frontier into Afghanistan with his hard-earned savings had an idea that he would be robbed. Without hesitation he proceeded to swallow the whole of his hoard, amounting to some 150 coins, and then, when the danger was passed, he coolly went to a military hospital and asked to be—and was—cut open so he could get his money again. An iron constitution like this is not likely to be undermined by indigestion or its allied ailments.

Few people, however, are blessed with such a constitution, and thousands suffer the agonies of indigestion who have not swallowed any indigestible substance. For all forms of this ailment Chas. Forde's bile beans are the world's specific. Describing how they cured her of acute dyspepsia Miss Annie Green, of Denton, Newhaven, said to a *Bognor Express* reporter. "So weak was my digestion that I dared not eat any solid food. For months on end I lived solely on milk puddings, until naturally I became ill and depressed. For three years I suffered from indigestion in its most acute form, and I never knew what it was to be without pain. I could not do any housework, and I began to despair of ever getting better. All I seemed to want was to be still and do nothing. I had severe pains in my chest and between the shoulders, accompanied by headache and a constant feeling of languor. My nerves were so shaken that I feared to go out after dusk. At night my sleep was disturbed by horrible nightmares. I took pills and tonics without relief, and one day I bought a box of bile beans. To my surprise a few doses brought relief. I persevered, and slowly but surely my condition improved. The distressing and painful symptoms I had so long endured gradually left me until I was eventually quite cured. My indigestion is now all that it should be, and my constitution is stronger by far." Bile beans for biliousness never fail to cure indigestion, headache, pains in the chest and shoulders, sleeplessness, biliousness, and all liver and kidney disorders. For constipation, piles, anæmia, and all female ailments, colds, rheumatism, influenza, they are unrivalled. One and three-halfpence or two and nine a box is the price at all chemists, or from the Bile Bean Manufacturing Co., Red Cross Street, London, E.C. There is nothing like them for restoring and keeping in order the digestive system.

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pursuit had led her into the grounds of the house and to the sequestered south lawn outside the drawing-room.

But here he was lost sight of. It seemed to her as if the figure had disappeared near the shrubbery away from the house, and she waited there seeking and calling distractedly to the hidden man that she would do nothing except ask him for her husband and tell him something that his sister had said for him before she died, and something also that his sister did not know. But there had been no answer, and she had waited and waited near the spot where she had seen him last, whilst Catherine and the others were searching the wood for her, fearing to leave it, lest she should lose him altogether, and with him all chance of knowing what had become of her husband.

And then from the window of the conservatory across the lawn she had seen the husband she already mourned as dead, appear clearly coming towards her hastily. She had watched him with a breathless wonder turn and retrace his steps, and then too late, as he re-entered the house, she had started forward calling to him. For as he disappeared she had seen another figure rise from the shrubbery close by the window through which George had just passed, and enter after him.

The next moment the report of a revolver ringing out into the silence of the garden seemed to put into one terrible expression all the sickening dread that had been in her heart.

She ran now only to see the verification of her fears. In the drawing-room a crowd had already collected, drawn from the next room by the report which had put an abrupt ending to the wrangling over the will that had still been going on there. They were all gathered in a close group round something in the centre of the room, all except the two or three who held Guy Despard a prisoner against the wall.

The murderer was making no effort at escape. His eyes held a satisfied smile which made his white face even more terrible. But Florence did not glance at him. She was pressing forward with eyes that strained themselves only to see the figure that lay extended on the floor in the centre of the room. Somebody in the centre of the group seemed to rise from his knees.

"He is quite dead," he said, "shot through the heart, I should say."

The words sounded the death-knell of her last hope.

The Foe Discovered.

The report which drew everybody into the drawing-room reached Grant Ilden in the midst of writing his last farewell to the girl he loved, but whom he felt that he could never ask to be his wife, and for a moment he sat undecided trying to explain it to himself.

Then the sound of hurrying feet downstairs took him down unwillingly, and he was ready to regret the impulse when in the hall he found himself face to face with Cathie who came hurrying in excitedly from the grounds. He had intended never to see her again. It would only make parting harder, and he was afraid of the temptation that might come to throw honour to the winds if she showed by a word or look that his going would pain her.

She turned to him instinctively, laying her hand on his arm.

"What has happened? There was a shot, and they tell me cousin George is here?"

"I know nothing," he said. "I was upstairs when I heard it. Everybody seems to be in the drawing-room."

They went there together, Cathie with her hand still on his arm in unconscious reliance, followed by some of the servants who had been accompanying Catherine in her vain search for Florence in the wood.

The little crowd had cleared now from the silent figure on the floor, and Cathie uttered a cry, seeing her worst fear realised.

"It is George. He has killed him."

But even as she spoke she saw that Lord Ilden was at the other side of the room holding his wife in his arms. At the same moment Grant's startled exclamation told her the truth.

"Good God! It is Percy."

"The man who deserved death at my hand." Guy Despard's voice, calm and emotionless, sounded clearly above the whispering around him and silenced it suddenly. "I have to ask your forgiveness, Lord Ilden," he went on in the same collected tone, "for the many attempts I have made to take your life. A just and all-seeing Providence guarded you and saved me from the sin of taking an innocent life in my ignorance. Now that I have found the villain who, by taking your name, tried to brand you with the shame of his ill-doing, He has no longer turned my aim or robbed me of my just vengeance."

To George himself the words were still only the meaningless rambling of a maniac. It was not till afterwards that his wife and Catherine together enabled him to understand how nearly he had been made a victim for the heartlessness of his cousin, who after all had deserved his suspicion by being his only actual foe.

And it was only in prison that Despard explained how his first suspicion of Ilden's innocence had been conceived during the cross-examination at Pennybrook Hall, and strengthened by Percival's kindness in setting him at liberty; how he had gone to Castledale to make inquiries, and found his suspicion confirmed.

For the present his explanation passed almost unheeded. George had thought only for the girl-wife, so unexpectedly given back to him, who trembled in his arms, scarcely able to believe yet that it was really he, alive and uninjured, who held her.

They were the first to leave the room, with its terrible tragedy, which only served to emphasise the danger through which George had passed.

As they sat in the pleasant little morning-room, where he had taken her, holding each other's hands and drinking deep of the love and thankfulness which each saw in the other's eyes, Florence was struck by a sudden thought.

"And now that you know that I did not help you a bit by marrying you," she said, "are you not sorry that you made me your wife?"

"Only for one reason," said George, and the lovely face looking into his grew serious.

"That I cannot marry you again, and ask everybody I know to rejoice with me in my good fortune."

It was afterwards, when the body of Percival Ilden, the foe in the family, whose tragic removal left Ilden at peace with his relatives and the world, had been carried to the principal bed-chamber of the house he had called his own for one short half-hour, that Sir Charles Barton took Grant aside.

"I am glad that you agree with me about your father's will," he said. "I do not wish to say anything against the dead, but there can be no doubt that your brother used undue influence to make him forget his other children. Now that you have the disposal of the property you will not forget that."

Grant was not in a mood to discuss the question; but it brought with it a sudden realisation, and he went up to his room to tear up a half-finished letter that need never be delivered now.

The End.

See Our Competitions On Pages 792 & 819.

(*Don't miss reading our new serial by Louis Tracy, entitled, "The Albert Gate Mystery," on page 793.*)

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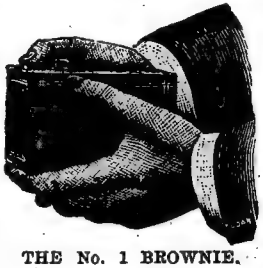

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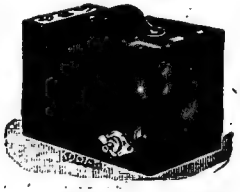

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For Love of Doris.

The True and the False.

Lieutenant Walter Manfield read the note with contracted brows and crushed it within his strong grasp. It was a reminder that a certain debt ought to have been paid a week previously.

"I must get Doris in the mind to marry me very soon!" he reflected, giving the last touches to his toilet. "Perhaps it is as well that the note came just now, as it may stimulate me to make a great effort, if I get the chance this afternoon. I daresay many a marriage proposal has been made and accepted on a Spring afternoon in the Park! These fellows will not wait much longer, and I can't go on as I am. It's either marriage or foreign service!"

He revolved the position in his mind as he strode along. Doris was the only daughter of Sir Arthur Manfield, Bart., whose fortune she would inherit almost entirely, for the old man idolised her and was not likely to divert any considerable portion of his wealth into other channels. The title would go to Lieutenant Manfield, with a small annuity, no doubt, but he would succeed to a barren title, for he could certainly not keep up the dignity unless he obtained the Baronet's daughter as well as his Baronetcy. He had tried Doris before, but the result had not been favourable.

"Still, I do not intend to be discouraged. The stake is too important a one to be given up lightly!" he soliloquised, as his eyes sought his cousin's form among the frequenters of the Park. "Ha, there she is!"

He was soon by her side on a seat. It was sufficiently warm to permit of a rest on a chair without taking cold, and it was fresh enough to produce roses on the fair cheeks. Most men would have been bewitched by her beauty, but Walter Manfield had other thoughts for the moment.

"Doris," he said tenderly, after having watched the loungers for three or four minutes, "let us walk to a more secluded spot. I have something to say to you, and I cannot endure to have the eyes of other men riveted on your beautiful face while I am speaking. And I must speak!"

The girl's face coloured over so slightly at the compliment, but she made no attempt to move.

"I am a little tired, Walter," she replied, with a touch of weariness in her tone. "I have been walking about and need a rest. We can stay here. Do you feel cold?"

"Not at all!" he responded quickly, trying to speak brightly in spite of his annoyance.

He could scarcely help guessing that the weariness was caused, not by walking, but by the thought that she would have to listen to something which she had already heard and did not wish to hear again; that this was so, was proved by the vivacious manner in which she spoke immediately afterwards.

"I call this a splendid day and there are so many people in the Park! There is old Lord Wallington—do you see him, Walter? We had a splendid time at his place last year, father and I, you know. And I really believe I saw——"

An impatient movement on the part of her companion stopped her.

"What is it?" she asked curiously.

Walter Manfield was looking steadfastly past his cousin at a man of martial figure. He shifted his gaze as soon as Doris spoke, but she had noted the direction of his eyes and followed it. A soldierly-looking man, with bronzed face, stern, with black eyes that were intently fixed on her, and a firm chin. The face was one that would attract attention anywhere, and it pleased Doris, but the man started as he became conscious that the girl he was so intently watching was also watching him, and he turned aside hurriedly.

"Who is that?" she inquired, turning to her cousin.

There was no need to explain further; Walter knew that she had seen that handsome face.

"It is Lord Marston," he replied, with a shade of vexation in his voice. "Rather rude of him! I cannot say that I like him, although he is a brother officer."

"Oh, he has just returned from India and succeeded to the title, has he not?" inquired Doris further. "Won the V.C. in a fight with some tribesmen, I think."

"Rather a rough sort of fellow," observed Walter, with a hard expression on his countenance. "He has a cruel sort of look. It's a great honour to win the V.C., but I always think that the courage required for that kind of deed denotes that the man is of that nature which crushes. You could see that in his set features, couldn't you, Doris?"

"I did not see anything of the kind!" declared Doris positively. "The face is stern and strong, but I fancy that he is kindly by nature. Something in the eye appeared to indicate that. Don't you think it is time we had a walk now?"

"I thought so several minutes since," retorted Walter.

But his cousin paid no heed to the retort; she was already on her feet and walking with her usual grace in the direction taken by Lord Marston. Lieutenant Manfield, walking by her side, endeavoured to guide her into a quiet place, but she feigned not to notice his evident intention. Marston, however, had now disappeared, and, as the spot was almost deserted, Walter placed a restraining hand on her arm and spoke.

"Doris, why are you so cruel to me? You know that I love you, that my one object in life is to have you for my wife, to cherish and watch over you! Will you not give me the answer for which I am waiting? It would crown my life with happiness, and it would, I am sure, be the consummation of your father's desires! Doris, Doris, tell me you love me!"

A shiver ran through the beautiful form, but Doris made no reply. The passionate speech of her companion did not strike her as out of place in the Park, but she felt an indefinable sentiment of aversion for the lieutenant at that moment; she had never felt any special affection for him, but now, with the figure of Lord Marston before her mind's eye, she actually disliked him.

"Doris, tell me you love me and will be mine!" whispered Walter. He had difficulty in restraining the exultation within him; he was conquering at last, for when a girl says nothing in response to a passionate declaration, it must be because she loves him in return and her maidenly timidity prevents her from acknowledging it.

"I cannot tell you that, because it is not true!" came the reply at length, cold and crushing. "I have told you before that I do not wish to be troubled by offers of marriage; I intend to devote myself to my father. Why should I trouble about marriage? I have all I want, and can enjoy life to the full!"

"I can wait!" urged Walter. "I will wait for years, if you will only set my heart at rest by saying that you will be mine!"

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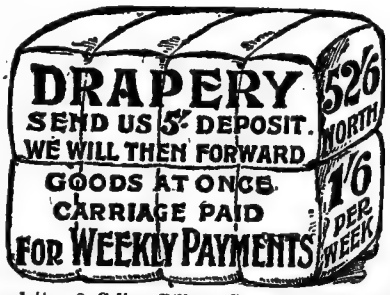

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"I will say nothing!" declared Doris. "Now," she added lightly, "let us go homewards and talk of something else. I must leave you on the way, however, for I have a call to make."

"As you do not wish me to accompany you, I will bow acquiescence," said Walter deferentially, although inwardly boiling. "It is a pity that you are not going straight home, as I promised your father to call on him this afternoon. I will tell him where I left you."

Five minutes later they parted, and it was two hours later when Doris reached home, having made other calls. She stepped into the hall with her usual gaiety, her sweet face lighted up by a radiant smile, but a chill struck her heart as she saw the old housekeeper coming towards her with a sad, almost frightened expression on her good-natured face.

"What—what is it?" she faltered. "Oh, what has happened, Mrs. Norton? My father——?"

"Yes, Miss Doris! He has had another attack, but don't be so upset!" stammered the kindly woman, not knowing what to say in order to break the terrible news gently. "It was so unexpected, but Mr. Walter was here, fortunately. It——"

"Let me go to him," cried Doris, the tears welling to the soft blue eyes. "He is in his bedroom?"

"Yes, Miss Doris, but you mustn't go there! Oh, don't! Stop her somebody! Good gracious, it will kill her!"

But Doris had dragged her arm from Mrs. Norton's grasp and was at the door of her father's bedroom. She rushed in and reached the bedside, where she stopped abruptly as one struck by a heavy blow, pressed her hands to her forehead and fell senseless into the arms of her cousin.

Doris never knew how the next week passed; she had a hazy recollection of sorrowful preparations and it was not till the day after she had seen the last of her beloved and indulgent father that she awoke to the fact that she was alone in the world, save for her cousin, now Sir Walter Manfield. And she was awakened to the fact in the most unpleasant manner.

The only will left by the late Baronet was one made several years previously, whereby he left all his property to his brother, Walter's father. All the deceased man's private drawers were searched, but no later will could be discovered. The family solicitor could throw no light on the matter; the late Sir Arthur, they said, had his own views about will-making and would not let his solicitors draw it up or know anything about it, and they did not even know the contents of the one produced.

"Then what is my position?" asked Doris, looking at her cousin in perplexity. They were alone; she had come to the study at his request.

"It is precisely for the purpose of explaining matters quietly that I have asked you to come here, Doris," said the new Baronet coldly. "This will means that all the money comes to me, as the only child of my father. You are left absolutely penniless."

"Penniless!" gasped Doris. "It cannot be! My father loved me too well! There must be another will somewhere!"

"I fear not!" said Walter unmoved. He seemed rather to enjoy the girl's distress. "It has long been my opinion that your father was determined to combine title and fortune. That being so, he saw no necessity to alter the old will. The matter is simple enough; you *must* marry me! It was your father's dying wish! I was with him, you remember, and he told me, in gasps, to look in a certain place for the will—which proved to be this one—and then said something which I could not catch distinctly, but which I judged to signify that it was necessary to maintain the title worthily and that you must marry me or——"

"Or what?" queried Doris, more calmly.

"My dear Doris, you know that your father thought a great deal of the title, and men have been known to sacrifice their children rather than——"

"It's wrong!" burst forth Doris hotly. "I'll never believe that my dear father would leave me penniless or force me into a marriage against my wish! There must be something wrong somewhere, but I am only a girl and I don't understand these matters."

"Then you refuse to marry me?" asked Sir Walter, trying to curb his anger. "Very well!" he added, almost savagely as she indicated her reply by a movement of her graceful head and a flash from the eyes that were generally so soft and melting. "Then you must take the consequences! Of course, I can make you an allowance, but I consider that I shall be acting contrary to the spirit of your father's will and desires if I give you more than a pittance. When you change your mind about marrying me, I shall be pleased to welcome you here again."

Doris understood him. She drew herself up proudly, gave him a withering look of scorn, and went back to her own room—first to weep and then to make preparations for leaving the home from which she was being driven.

"He thinks that I shall be unable to earn my living, or that I shall tire of being a servant and shall be ready to marry him for the sake of the wealth and position, but he is mistaken. It will be hard, but the Manfields possess courage!"

Almost to the last, Doris hoped that another will would be found or that the solicitors would force Sir Walter to halve the money with her, but neither event happened. There was an idea that the will might be contested, but the statements of the dying man, as given by Sir Walter, formed such strong evidence in favour of the will that the idea of contesting it was abandoned. Doris went forth into a none-too-pitiful world to earn her living as a kind of companion-housekeeper to a widow with a mansion in Sussex.

TURN TO PAGE 815 AND READ A REMARKABLE LETTER.

Mrs. Blackstone had been a widow only six months, but there was a conviction among her friends that she would not remain a widow longer than she could help; she was already receiving and giving parties, ostensibly on the ground that her own feelings must be subordinate to the obligations that devolved on a lady of property and the widow of a county magnate, but that excuse was too thin for most people. She had engaged Doris Manfield on the death of her husband, and found her very useful. In order to hide her identity, Doris had assumed as a surname, half of her own name and was known as Miss Field.

It was not long after Mrs. Blackstone began her parties that she discovered that Miss Field received more attention than she did herself; she had been so engrossed in herself and her own attractions that she had failed to observe that Miss Field's simple loveliness outshone her own more pronounced attractiveness. At first she smiled disdainfully at the comments she overheard concerning Miss Field's beauty, but afterwards she realised that her companion house-keeper might become a dangerous rival and she skilfully contrived that Miss Field should not appear when there were guests.

It was rather a cut for Doris to find that she was debarred from appearing in the drawing-room, as she had been wont to do for nearly six months, but she consoled herself with the reflection that it left her more leisure. She had given Mrs. Blackstone every satisfaction, and that lady had gleaned some information concerning Society manners, which she imagined that Miss Field had picked up in her previous experience, but now she found fault in various ways and Doris' life became less endurable. Mrs. Blackstone only knew that her companion had "come down in the world" through the death of her father; she had not the faintest notion that she had been a Society belle.

"I don't mind!" said Doris to herself, drying her eyes, as she sat in the solitude of her own room, "it will prevent me from meeting someone—being recognised by someone who knew me in the old days!"

It was the afternoon of a glorious day in late summer and Doris was seated at the window of her room, enjoying a few minutes' leisure from the duties of attending to the wants of a

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household of people. Her window overlooked a part of the grounds, but she was not surveying the scene through the window, she was deep in thought, and staring into space. Gradually there came over her the feeling that someone was looking at her; she turned her eyes slowly from one point to another, but could see no one. Her range extended farther back, and there, at some distance, a man was standing, his face in her direction. Rather vexed at his seeming rudeness, she was about to leave the window when the similarity of this incident with that in the Park occurred to her mind and she gave a scrutinising glance at the figure. It was familiar—it was the same, she was certain!

Her heart beat faster, and a strange, delicious feeling of mingled joy and sadness took possession of her—for the sentiments of pain and pleasure are closely allied. She dared not confess to herself that the stern, strong face and the kindly eyes had haunted her since, and—yes, she had seen them before her when she had refused her cousin's offer of marriage! She had mentally compared both men and it had strengthened her decision not to marry Walter!

With a start Doris awoke from her musing and hurriedly left the window to go below and resume her duties. Was that really Lord Marston? Was he coming here? She had been informed that another gentleman was expected and had been given to understand that he was a man of importance, but no name had been mentioned. She was almost trembling, but another thought took possession of her and she grew strong and defiant.

"Even if he did see me in the house, he would not think of me; I am no longer a lady of position! This world is cruel to us women; why should not my father's title have come to me?"

She soon found that Lord Marston was indeed the guest expected by Mrs. Blackstone, whose brother was now staying with her. On the morrow Doris had another surprise; still another guest was to arrive in the afternoon, and none other than Sir Walter Manfield!

"Thank goodness!" murmured the girl. "I shall have a chance of keeping out of the way! And I didn't accept his offer of an allowance!"

The working under-housekeeper did most of the actual work, but Doris had to do the planning necessary in a large house, so she had not much time for reflection. Her own constitutional had to be taken in the early morning, when scarcely anyone was astir, and she thoroughly enjoyed the solitary walk. It was the second morning after Lord Marston's arrival that she was startled during her stroll through the garden to hear a voice exclaim: "At last!" and to find herself face to face with the man who had watched her from afar on two occasions.

"I have been trying to find you for six months!" he declared, without pretence at introduction. "I discovered that you were the daughter of Sir Arthur Manfield, but that was not till you had disappeared. Then I saw you at the window two days ago, but I have not seen you among the guests, although your cousin is here, but I would not ask for you. At last I have found you, Miss Manfield!"

He took her two hands in his and gazed ardently with his kindly, true eyes into hers. Both were unconscious of the strangeness of this meeting; it appeared to be the natural outcome of circumstances. Doris felt his gaze sink straight to her heart and her eyes dropped before it. All the world was forgotten in that delightful moment.

"Miss Manfield," he said tenderly, "have you no word for me?"

Then it all came back to her.

"I am not Miss Manfield here," she cried, trying to free herself, "I am only Miss Field one of the members of the domestic staff and not a guest, and my cousin does not know that I am here!"

"I do not understand," he replied in surprise. "No, no. I will not let you go till I know more! Tell me!"

TURN TO PAGE 815 AND READ A REMARKABLE LETTER.

He tightened his grasp and she ceased to struggle. It was pleasant to be held captive thus by a strong hand! In a few words she told him what had happened.

"But you must let me go!" she declared, making another effort to get free. "What would they think if they saw you here and what would my position be worth? I have my living to earn and I am nothing to you!"

"That is not true!" he asserted boldly. "You are everything to me! I have sought you for months and I would have done so for years. I love you, and I wish to take you from this place and give you a position worthy of you. Doris—I may call you Doris, may I not? You became dear to me as soon as I saw you; it is not a fleeting love, for it has grown stronger and stronger. I love you and you will be mine? Say 'yes,' Doris?"

"Oh, let me go!" she pleaded, her beautiful face suffused with blushes. "I must go or someone will see——"

A slight sound near them caused him to relax his hold and glance round. She took advantage of the loosening of his grasp to slip away and run into the house.

Lord Marston saw nobody, but the concluding portion of the interview had been witnessed by Sir Walter Manfield, whose surprise may be imagined. He quickly jumped to the conclusion that his cousin was engaged in the service of Mrs. Blackstone.

"She shall not have Lord Marston!" he vowed, referring to his cousin. "She won't marry me, so I'll see if I can force her into it! Now, how can I get her away from here quickly? H'm! I know! It strikes me that our worthy hostess is rather gone on Marston. Exactly!"

The result of his further meditations were revealed in an interview between Mrs. Blackstone and Miss Field later in the day.

"Miss Field," cried the lady of the house, as Doris entered in obedience to a peremptory summons. "I am amazed at what has just come to my ears! I should never have supposed that you would be seen flirting with one of my guests at an early hour! I need ask for no explanation; I will give you a month's salary in lieu of notice and I will ask you to leave this house at once!"

"Then somebody did see us!" thought poor Doris. Aloud she replied: "I was not flirting! I met Lord Marston by accident. He——"

She interrupted herself. Had she any right to say that he had sought her out? Was not that for him to say? Mrs. Blackstone laughed at the break.

"I am glad that you have the grace to feel ashamed at hinting that he persecuted you with his attentions, Miss Field!" she sneered. "And the fact that you mentioned a name, which *I* did not, shows that my information is correct! Silly girl! Do you suppose that he cares for *your* face—he, a man of the world! He is amusing himself with you! *I* could tell you something that would dispel that illusion!"

There was a significance in the last remark that was not lost on Doris, who had suspected that widow's weeds were not to the liking of Mrs. Blackstone. Doris flushed at the thought that Marston had been playing with her, but her pride enabled her to hold herself upright and confront Mrs. Blackstone defiantly.

"If I am not wanted, I can go!" she said proudly. "But neither you nor anyone else shall say that I was flirting!"

"Hoity-toity!" sneered Mrs. Blackstone again. She felt that she was coming out of the encounter second best. "Go and pack, and I will have the dogcart ready to take you to the station and a cheque signed."

Doris left her tormentor with a heart like lead. Marston had been playing with her! It was too cruel! Who had seen them? There was some consolation, however; he would not be able to continue his amusement and she would escape a meeting with her cousin.

When Sir Walter Manfield learnt that Miss Field was gone,

(*Concluded on page* 831.)

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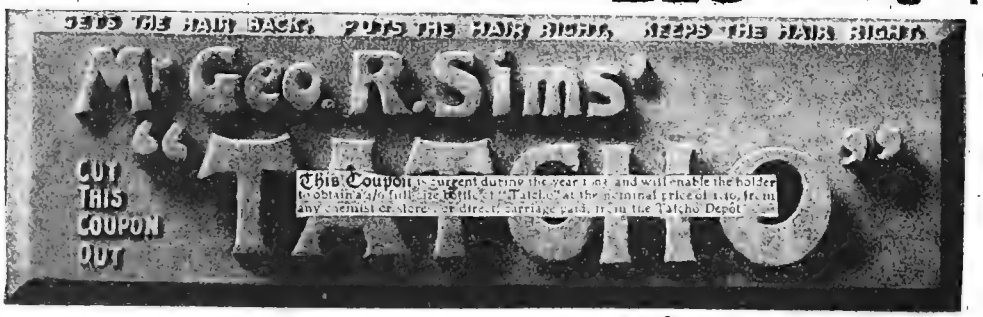
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he nearly uttered an impolite expression ; he had made up his mind to keep his eye on his cousin, but she had flown. He gave instructions to a firm of private detectives to seek her ; the cost of keeping her under supervision would be nothing to him out of a rent roll of £50,000 a year, and he was now bent on making her his wife.

Lord Marston was also surprised and felt unable to explain why she had disappeared without giving him notice. He had an uneasy suspicion that his indiscretion had been at the bottom of it, but to have asked his hostess would not have mended matters. He also resolved to seek her, and at the same time he entered upon another quest.

Doris contrived to elude the efforts of those who were looking for her ; with the aid of an old friend she secured an appointment in an office, and for nearly nine months, till summer was coming again, she went to and fro to work, lodging in a home provided by a friendly society for the help of young women in business. Here she learnt much about the life of the lower middle class, and she registered a vow that if she ever came into her own again, she would use the wealth for less selfish purposes than she would otherwise have done.

"But it will never come!" she sighed. "It is fifteen months since my dear father died and nothing has come to light. Still, I cannot believe that he meant it to be so!"

As she left the office one evening, a hand was placed on her shoulder ; she turned and saw Lord Marston. She shrank from him ; he had amused himself with her and she resented it.

"I do not wish to see you!" she cried, her breath coming in gasps.

He paled and his voice shook as he said ;

"Why? If I did you harm, it was my great love that led me unwittingly to do so! Come away with me and let us talk! We shall excite attention here!"

They walked away together, and he asked her what had happened.

"You were pretending love for me and yet you were going to marry Mrs. Blackstone—have married her, I suppose, by now!" she said vehemently. "I am a poor girl now, and may be trifled with!"

"Who said that? I have a right to know!" His voice was hoarse.

"She said—she hinted at it!" responded Doris slowly. She wondered if she had been deceived.

"It was a falsehood!" he maintained. "I perceived, after a day or two, that she was trying to lure me into marriage with her, and I left her mansion on a pretext. It was you, and only you, I wanted and still want! Doris, I have worked for you all these nine months. I have known of your whereabouts only a few days, for you have cleverly evaded us. But now I can bring you good news. The will has been found! I have it here!"

He had to place his arm round her quickly, for she swayed as if about to fall. She quickly recovered and asked him pleadingly not to jest.

"It is no jest!" he returned. "Let us go to the house which should be yours and I will explain. You can claim a right to it now."

He hailed a cab and they went to the old house. How dear it was to her!

"Where is Sir Walter?" she inquired.

"He is leaving the country!" said Lord Marston gravely. "Mrs. Norton, make your mistress comfortable and then stay here while I tell the story."

The old housekeeper was crying all the time with joy, as she took Doris' hat and gloves and seated her in a comfortable chair. Doris listened in amazement to Lord Marston's story.

"I set detectives to work to get at the truth of that will question, which you told me about that—er—that morning. I suspected some foul play on the part of your cousin. It took a long time to trap him, but it came at last. Mrs. Norton helped, and I am bound to admit that my men acted unlawfully in searching the house several times without a warrant and in the absence of the master. Well, we found the will, found it among a lot of old papers which Sir Walter had gathered together to destroy.

"When your father was dying, he told Walter where his lost will was, for he kept it in an old writing desk where it might have remained unseen for years, in a secret drawer. He was somewhat eccentric, was your father, I fear! Sir Walter found the will and saw it left everything to you. He was tempted ; he wanted the money and you, but especially the money. You would not marry him, so he conceived the idea of destroying the will, believing that under letters of administration the property would be divided between you. He took the will away and destroyed it, as he thought ; that is, he burnt the large envelope. But he forgot that he had taken the will out of the envelope. That was not wonderful, for the envelope was very stiff and the will was written on a single sheet of foolscap, and on one side of the paper only. He had taken some other papers out of the envelope containing the will, so, when the will was left out of the envelope, it got among those papers and your cousin didn't notice it.

"He crowded those papers into a drawer in the room usually reserved for him here, and that drawer was not searched, of course, in the hunt for the will—only your father's tables and belongings were searched. Afterwards, those papers and others were piled up ready to be burnt, and there the will was found. I took it upon myself to confront your cousin with the will, and I forced him to confess. He has left the country."

"How wicked of him!" cried Doris. "Yet I should not feel happy if I allowed him to remain without any means at all. I will see that he has an allowance."

"It is very good of you to be so generous to one who has done you a great wrong," said Lord Marston. "And those who have tried to help you?"

The tenderness of his manner induced Mrs. Norton to think that it was time she attended to her ordinary duties. Left alone with Doris, Lord Marston took her hand and knelt by her side, looking up into the eyes that had dropped before his glance.

"It was rather cruel to suspect me of playing with you and being in love with Mrs. Blackstone!" said he, with feigned reproachfulness. "Do you think I could be so deceitful?"

"No!" cried Doris penitently. "But I was so miserable!"

"Our marriage will be mentioned in the papers," said Lord Marston, half an hour later, "and, as Mrs. Blackstone will not know that Doris Manfield is an old acquaintance, we will send her a wedding card with your name like this : DORIS (MAN)FIELD. I should like to see her face when she reads that!"

G. L. Parkyn.

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Conducted by Cynthia.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must in future be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of Short Stories.*]*

Christmas—The Lover's Season.

Among other pleasant things, Christmas is largely the time of lovers. Those who have fallen out find the festive season the best of all peacemakers, and a little present or even cards may once more bring young people together. Then the faint-hearted lover, too timid to say the right thing at ordinary times, often takes courage at Christmas and pops the halting question, which the girl, amidst the prevailing air of happiness, will feel she can no longer delay to answer in the affirmative. Hard-hearted fathers may by led by Christmas into taking kinder views of their children's love affairs, and even the stern mother may unbend where she would otherwise remain firm.

The Time for a Proposal.

So this is the time for both myself and my readers, is it not? All the questions I have before me to-day seem as though I need only mention "Christmas," and they will solve themselves. For instance, "Faint Heart" has been paying attention to Jessie for six months, and has been simply longing to propose. But every time he has braced himself up for the ordeal, the occasion has not been fitting. Either the girl has been worried or pre-occupied, or not in serious mood, so poor "Faint Heart" has been compelled to stave off his advances. He asks me if I can suggest the best opportunity for his resuming his quest.

* * * *

I will answer "Christmas." Choose one evening during the holiday season, when you are alone in a room where the light is lowered, and the mistletoe suggestively hanging near your heads, and the holly and other decorations are all around you; start a romantic conversation, and when you have got her attention, say the right word. With so difficult a girl, certainly some such measures are necessary for you, "Faint Heart," to get a hearing to your question.

The Time to Try Again.

Then there is the man who is doubtful as to whether a certain girl likes him, or even takes an interest in him. This is "A. C. G." (Bristol). Some eighteen months ago he used to see a great deal of her at friends' houses, and they got interested in each other. He did not go to the extent of saying he loved her, because her attitude was that of a friend only. Yet he always felt that he could love her, if only she gave some little hint that it was likely to be returned. Now they are very likely to meet again, as "A. C. G." has been invited for the first time for a year to the house of a mutual friend. How do I advise him to proceed?

* * * *

"A. C. G." has a splendid opportunity. Their long parting must have caused her some thought over the matter. She has either decided that she does or does not like him in a deeper sense than that of mere acquaintanceship. When they meet, she will show it by her appearance on seeing him. If she looks very pleased, then let "A. C. G." go to work energetically, for there is something in it. If her reception is merely cold, then he should proceed warily There is no surer guide to another's feelings towards oneself than the first greeting after a long separation.

And for a Reconciliation.

Then there is "Sophie," who still loves George, but owing to an absurd misunderstanding about six weeks ago they have not seen each other. From rumours she has heard, he is terribly unhappy about the affair, but too proud to start trying to make it up. He will not call on her, and when he meets her in the street he only bows and passes on. "Sophie" has found out since this quarrel that he is the only man she could ever love, yet she, too, does not think she ought to start the reconciliation task.

* * * *

Again I reply "Christmas." If you have not already done so, "Sophie," send him a present, with a card containing some nice little text or motto. If that does not bring him back I shall be very much surprised. I have known many a time when a Christmas card has put such little quarrels right, and don't see why it should not in your case.

An Awkward Plight.

"R. E." tells me a perplexing tale. Some time ago he met a widow of forty, who took rather a fancy to him. Thinking the affair rather a good joke, he cultivated her society. One evening, after they had been to a theatre, and had had a very good supper, he proposed to her, not at the time quite knowing what he was saying. He thought she would take it all as a joke. But next time they met, while he had almost forgotten the affair, she reminded him of his proposal, and said she had already made certain plans in preparation. What can "R. E." do? He does not really love the woman at all, and though she has some money he could not live on her means, and thinks such a marriage would be bad for his career.

* * * *

You have put your foot into it, "R. E." I think you had better tell the lady that you did not know what you were saying when you made that proposal. Ask her to release you from an engagement, pointing out that you could not enter into it under the circumstances in which you are. Possibly she may be well-disposed, and will release you. If, however, she threatens to take any legal steps, I should consult a solicitor. I do not think the law is sufficiently favourable to widow ladies who have drawn young men into their clutches, to be very encouraging to her to proceed against you for breach of promise. She is not in quite the same position as the young girl who has been deceived.

We Cannot Give Introductions.

I sympathise with you, "Virginia Creeper," but I am afraid I must say what Madge Morris said. With every wish in the world, I cannot undertake to introduce clients to each other. This is, you see, only a little paper, and not a Love Agency, and if I were to start introducing people to each other, how should I know where to draw the line? If I agreed in in one case, I could scarcely refuse in another, so I fear all I can do is just to express the hope that one so evidently clever and accomplished as yourself may soon meet a man worthy of your affections without having to employ an agent.

* * * *

As to an English girl wanting to go to Africa, on the off chance of finding a desirable husband, I think the idea is foolish. If a girl cannot find the right man at home, I doubt if she will find him there. From what girl friends out there tell me in letters, the men to be met with in this colony are not at all the sort likely to appeal to a pure-minded English girl. The hard rough work of mines may make money for men, but it does not often make for much else. Besides, "Virginia Creeper" would do well to remember that the proportion of Britons born against those of foreign origin is by no means large.

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